Clive Barry

Fly Jamskoni

a novel

Fly Jamskoni Clive Barry

FABER

Fly Jamskoni

CLIVE BARRY

Once you have worked in Jamskoni you feel sort of overqualified for anywhere else. Which is one reason why Hector [illegible] administrative officer in colonial days, finds himself back in what is now an independent republic helping to administer Jamskoni Airlines—well, certainly a Dragon Rapide anyway—in close consultation with the Minister of Aviation. 'You and the Minister know each other already,' said the Chief of Mission as Reed signed his service contract. Readers of *The Spear Grinner*, Mr. Barry's extraordinary first work of fiction, will recognize him too—beneath the words 'Minister of Aviation' on the door of his car can be descried faintly the original legend 'District Commissioner's Office Boy'. Then as now, 'the Ostrich', with his urbane, public-school manner, dominates the scene: his manipulation of a control column is as hair-raisingly skilful as his driving.

Colonial Jamskoni was 'an oasis of chaos in a nebulous world'. Only Clive Barry could do justice [illegible] arising from the comi[illegible] independence, an airp[illegible] hostess in the shape [illegible] fleshly Mrs. Buccleug[illegible] highly individual and[illegible] won him the *Guardia*[illegible] for *Crumb Borne*; the [illegible] increase the number of

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SOUTHWARK

FLY JAMSKONI

by

Clive Barry

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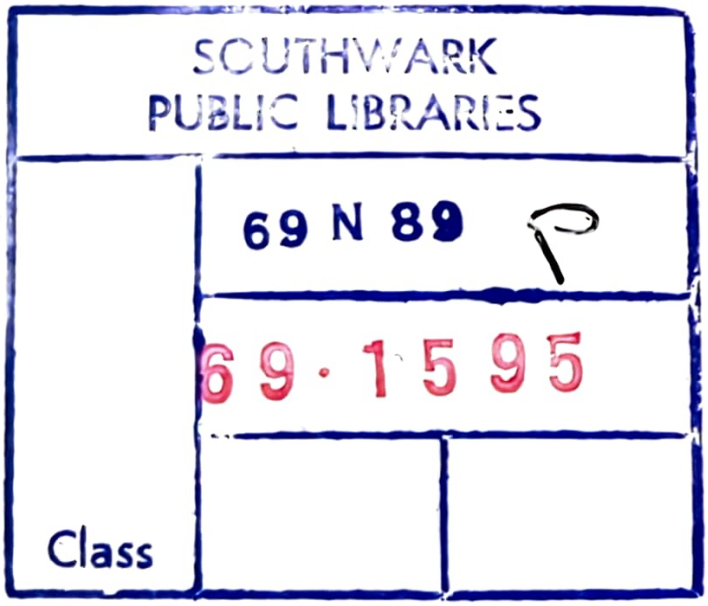

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by the same author

Crumb Borne

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The Spear Grinner

More or less central to Jamskoni republic there used to be a volcanic crater. All right, it's still there. West of it, uplands culminate in a mountain and east of the crater downlands decline to an ocean. On a basalt rim around it, a rainforest thrives and, on a sandy floor within the crater, an airport strives.

According to whether passengers are present or absent, so the airport either rumbles with hubbub or clonks with hollowness. In dry air the clonk carries farther than the rumble.

It carries right up to the basalt rim which Hector Reed shares with various dromedaries, garanooks, geladas, dik-diks, ratels, gabon vipers and leaping galagos. Being an unaccommodated bachelor in the upcountry republic, Reed has learned to read the hubbub by not hearing anything. He uses open tent flaps as extensions to his ears.

Whenever he gets down to it, the hubbub provides an audience for Reed's upcountry stories. Since the passengers fly in and out like desert locusts, he is spared a fatigue of concocting fresh stories. If he cannot change a repertoire at least he can change the audience.

He wears a safari shirt with something like a spear hole in it. He has a way of hitching it aside as though to hide the hole. Of laughing as he speaks of old colonial days when his heart was light. He has a way of keeping tears out of his eyes when he sings bush ballads. Some of the passengers go out and wait on an airstrip even when next take off is hours away.

No one had ever claimed that Hector Reed was trained. He happened to be revisiting Jamskoni and sublimating manageable frights into unimaginable memories, when he spoke to a chief of mission about vacancies. The Chief reassured him: "My staff are always resigning or lying up in hospital. There are permanent vacancies in Jamskoni."

"In that case," muttered Reed, "I shall temporarily become permanent." "You will have to accept the bad with the good. We cannot promise you excitement all the time." "No doubt I shall find some problem for every solution, sir." "That is precisely the point, Reed. The extempore days are gone. Jamskoni is organized now. You have to comply." "I see."

"For instance, in a case of emergency you will summon the police by blowing this whistle," while speaking the Chief of Mission lay a police-whistle upon a table. Hector Reed turned his head away. Through a barred window he looked out into a market.

Even though there were almost no customers one or two fruit vendors were loitering in the market. In a parked automobile Mrs Buccleuch sat conversing with a minister of aviation. A door on the automobile swung open.

From where Reed stood it was possible to notice that Mrs Buccleuch had tremendous thighs encased in a little skirt. An abdomen was tucked out of sight. She caught Reed's eye and stretched the skirt.

Warped by a dry spell, the table imparted an acceleration to the police-whistle. Reed made a scooping gesture but the whistle rang on a cement floor and rebounded into a loll chair. He dug fingers into the chair.

Since the fingers kept widening a gap between two pieces of upholstery, the whistle kept dropping farther out of reach. Rasping coughs shaped like words came

from the Chief of Mission: "The auditors may require to see the whistle at any time." Reed desisted immediately. "Beyond me," he said turning again to the market.

Mrs Buccleuch was alighting from the automobile. A skinny mouth on the Minister was seen to be moving. She nodded and the Minister drove the automobile on a curve around the market. She walked up some white-washed steps toward an old colonial club.

It seemed that she was exerting pressure on the tremendous thighs, not for propulsion purposes, but as though fearful of mounting too many steps at a time. A fruit vendor accosted her.

"Congratulations are in order," the Chief of Mission now had a contract on the table. He was tearing at it with stained finger-nails, "upon your appointment." "Thank you, sir."

While haggling with the fruit vendor, Mrs Buccleuch mounted the steps. The skirt swelled. Calfs tightened and softened by turns. "You will notice some changes in Jamskoni, Reed," the finger-nails were tearing shreds off the contract. "I dare say," said Reed.

It was Reed's second visit to Jamskoni. The Chief had not changed much. His spectacles were more presbyopic, his eyebrows more tangled. But the finger-nails were as before, stained and fidgety.

The Chief and Hector Reed stood at the table with the contract between them. "This time you have to sign a contract." "Mind if I borrow your pen, sir?" "Go ahead. There might be some ink in the left socket. You will notice that ministerial approval has already been obtained for you to start work."

Coming through the barred window, a sunset colour fell across the contract. The pen had a powdery crust on a nib. Under the sunset the crust glittered greenishly.

"What exactly is the work?" "Substantially the same as before." "Ah. Well, as far as. . ." "You know how the herders say: ilaali nirgihii." "Exactly." "Fresh problems are like young camels. They get first attention." "Oh." "Now, we have a young problem concerning hemp."

The nib scraped on the contract incising grooves and depositing the powdery crust. Reed spat on the crust and greenish saliva ran along the grooves. "Come now, Reed. Don't say you have moral qualms?" "None whatever," he replaced the pen in an eyesocket of a human cranium.

"Not bad chaps really, the hemp dealers. No other means of livelihood. That is all." The cranium was an ornament for the table. It had once been worn by a district officer whose dedication to duty surpassed a dedication to livelihood. The Chief retained the cranium as a relic of right thinking. As an example to others. "You mean the problem is economic rather than moral, sir?" "That is it, Reed. You see? You spot the trouble straight off."

Eyesockets in the cranium functioned as inkwells. Due to the dry spell, the ink had thickened. Whenever a contract was signed, thick tears coursed from the cranium.

"By the way," the Chief's voice always rasped, "what happened after you departed last time? The army of unemployed was rather too tame, what?" For a blink the sunset was extinguished as the automobile passed outside the window and braked. Sandy particles squeaked. "The thing is," Reed was mumbling, "once you have worked in Jamskoni, you feel sort of overqualified for anywhere else." "Did you get married?" "No." "Splendid."

Ah yes. Congratulations. Reed was more or less incapable of registering a car let alone a female. In Jamskoni, such registry was evolved rather than decreed. It

depended on respectability rather than on pieces of paper.

The Chief picked up the pen and chipped at petrified tears. When the pen chipped against a tooth, musical tones sounded within the cranium. "The Minister has made arrangements for you to settle in." "Exactly where do I settle?"

Reed crumpled the contract between clenched hands. The door on the automobile creaked open and crashed shut. The dry spell had removed lubrication from the door. After crashing shut, the door popped open again. Reed peered out through the barred window.

Skinny fingers on the Minister out there were pressing the door back into place. There was a croaking of local vernacular. Reed sighed. There was a series of sandy squeaks as a pair of pilot's boots came striding forward.

"You are referring to accommodation, Reed? No problem, really. You can consult the Minister of Aviation right away." "You mean that no house has been assigned to me?" Reed's eyes were bright.

The Chief of Mission pointed a sunburnt finger toward the sunset. Hector Reed squinted out through the window. "Now, look here, Reed," the rasping voice dropped to a lower level. Eyebrows like caterpillars squirmed down behind the spectacles. "You can see that bit of erosion up on the rim of the crater? About nine o'clock from the rainforest. That is where you live." "What? All alone?"

The sunburnt finger was raised to indicate an escarpment, which was a rim as seen from inside a crater. Since the sunset was behind it, the rim was black. A tent, pitched on the rim, added a small peak to the black. And erosion, eating into the rim, deducted a small gap.

A bellow from a hyena drifted down through the gap

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into the crater. Hector Reed bit a corner off the contract and chewed it. The contract was hot from the sunset. The corner was tasteless.

When the Minister of Aviation appeared at the window, a gaunt shadow was projected across the table. "You and the Minister know each other already," growled the Chief. Reed snarled: "Am I supposed to live up there all alone?" "It is all right, Hector," the Minister called through the window. "The hyenas never come in from the grazing area. They are nervous of the pythons in the rainforest."

Above and beyond the black rim could be seen uplands, foothills, plateaux, outcrops, and glaciers of Ol-Skoni mountain. All was illuminated sideways by the sunset. A shadow of Ol-Skoni was an upside-down peak of colourlessness imprinted on a high layer of orange-tinted cirrus.

"As I remember it," cried Hector Reed, "that part of Jamskoni is stiff with gangsters." "That problem has been dealt with," the Chief spoke loudly: "We appointed the head gangster as superintendent of police."

"Oh, brilliant," Reed was scratching his knees and pacing up and down between the table and the window. "Last time I had a burglar-proof bungalow," he whined.

Above the high layer of cirrus, a jet aircraft hurtled along a flight level. From outside the barred window, the Minister of Aviation croaked: "All the houses are occupied, old bean." He was peering up at the jet with bloodshot eyes. "There cannot be that many contracts," said Reed.

The jet aircraft was audible in the crater except when it was baffled by the bellow from the hyena. Traversing the upside-down shadow of Ol-Skoni, it was visible, but once masked by the orange-tinted cirrus, it vanished.

The Minister swivelled the bloodshot eyes back on to Reed. "The Superintendent commandeered all the houses," he croaked. "He needs them for police staff."

Hector thumped the contract down on the table and snatched up a plastic valise from the cement floor. "And what about me?"

The Chief cut in: "We need you up there on the rim, Reed, because herders from the coast keep sneaking in that way. In fact, their camels started that erosion."

The Chief blinked his nostrils like a camel. It was known that Jamskoni children laughed when he did this. Reed did not laugh: "Why has no one mentioned this before?" "The erosion is insidious." "I mean about me." "It is mentioned in the contract." "Do I have to stop herders because they start erosion?" "No. Because they smuggle hemp."

Hector Reed clutched a bar in the window. He peered up at the rim of the crater. The sunset jabbed red rays at him through the bit of erosion. "For the time being," the Chief stepped behind the table, "the Minister will take charge of induction. Tomorrow you will be briefed."

"Hop in, old chap," croaked the Minister. "We shall soon get you sorted out." "All right, Ostrich," muttered Reed.

Because he had a gaunt figure and a hideous beak, the Minister of Aviation was often called Ostrich. Originally, he had been called Ostrich as a term of derision. But by accepting the term readily he had nullified the derision. And finally, he had won a democratic election on publicity pertaining to the term.

Seen from where Mrs Buccleuch stood on the white-washed steps, the barred window resembled an animal cage. There was Reed inside, gorgeously illuminated by the sunset, clutching at the bars and staring out as though

in desperation. His hair had pinched up on end and his jaw sagged. Mrs Buccleuch stopped bargaining for fruit. She opened a handbag and took out a police-whistle.

Upon noticing the whistle, Reed disappeared from inside the window. He stepped outside into the market which was almost deserted. The sunset was without heat. The red rays burned coldly across the sandy particles. They painted greenish contours upon a decrepit elephant.

The elephant had perished some time ago. Its tattered remains lay across a furrow. As Reed watched, a pair of eyes flashed within a framework of ribs.

A hyena came out from among the ribs. It grumbled at Reed and scampered away toward the rim of the crater. A white-headed vulture flapped down from a thorntree and took the hyena's place.

"What was it you said about hyenas?" asked Reed, but the Ostrich seemed preoccupied with the door of the automobile.

Having spent several weeks being analysed by hyenas and vultures, the elephant now ranged over an area broad enough for a herd of elephants. A gigantic skull had been shoved fifty yards away on the steps of the old colonial club.

On the whitewashed steps, Mrs Buccleuch had gone back to haggling with the fruit vendor. She had selected a couple of tremendous pawpaws. She was holding them side by side for contemplation and pressing them to test for ripeness. They were the same size and shape as her own thighs. Reed shouted at her: "You have got the best pawpaws in the market."

Wedging a shin against it, the Ostrich savagely smacked skinny fingers down on to the door. The door opened. "It is automatic," he croaked, licking blood off the fingers. Reed hopped in.

The automobile had been long in service. Paint on the door outlined the words: Minister of Aviation. Supplied on governmental contract, the paint was deteriorating like the elephant.

More he polished the automobile, more the Minister of Aviation thinned out, and more an undercoating became legible. The undercoating spelled: District Commissioner's Office Boy.

While hopping into the automobile, Hector Reed said: "If I have to live in a tent, then I want to know what is being done about security." "Ah, security, old chap."

The Ostrich had to hold a gear lever steady with a knee while allowing a clutch to snap into engagement. The automobile jerked before lurching forward at speed.

"I mean personal security, Ostrich." "No problem. As a matter of fact, you know my opinion already. Anyone is mad to carry a gun. Guns seem to attract tragedies. See what I mean? And everyone is trying to steal them from you all the time."

Each time the automobile lurched, Reed's back was slapped by leather upholstery. "Doesn't anything work properly around here?" he cried above a badly-timed motor. "A knife would work better for you, Hector. Nobody would knock you off to steal a knife."

"Strangely enough, old bean, a knife is more frightening than a gun. Everyone has had some painful accident with a knife during his life. You wave a knife at him, you are also waving memory of pain."

Even before Reed got settled into it, the automobile had swerved away from outside the barred window. Skinny fingers manipulated a steering wheel while bloodshot eyes gazed vertically at the layer of cirrus. The automobile was accelerating horizontally. Reed shouted:

"Nothing has been done about security. By the way, can you smell smoke?"

"If you use a knife properly, there is almost no blood." "What?" Reed was gripping the plastic valise so tightly it creaked like leather. "Look out," he added. "It's only smouldering rubber," croaked the Ostrich. "I mean ahead," yelled Reed.

As the automobile hurtled forward, the rim of the crater appeared to shoot upward. Soon it blacked out the sunset. A coat of dust on the automobile's windscreen became transparent. And a formation of tribal policemen became discernible in shadow beneath the crater rim.

The Ostrich's voice croaked out too hastily: "Well, I am referring to the simi, of course. It is a sort of thin knife. Something like a hatpin." "You are on the wrong track, Ostrich."

The skinny fingers danced around the steering wheel. The sandy particles squealed under rubber tyres. The windscreen swayed sideways and the formation of tribal policemen came past like cinders in a draught.

"Your pockets don't bulge with the simi, Hector, old chum. The simi is quick, silent, and it leaves no wound." "I cannot keep up with you, Ostrich."

Having met a wall of the crater, the automobile now tilted the windscreen up toward the layer of cirrus. It headed toward the bit of erosion on the rim of the crater. While the Ostrich leaned forward, Reed was slammed back on to the leather upholstery.

The Ostrich pointed with an elbow. "There's a simi for you now," he croaked. "We just passed it." Screwing his face out through a side window, Hector Reed gazed back down into the crater.

From behind the automobile, a cloud of sandy particles was rising like smoke from a bushfire. Enveloped in the

cloud, the tribal policemen were managing to keep their formation intact. A few paces from the formation, however, a blurred figure could be discerned hopping about. It was the Superintendent of Police. A spark of the sunset glanced off a blade in his hand. It was the simi knife.

Basically, the Superintendent wore a uniform identical with that of the tribal policemen. But where the policemen had truncheons hanging from belts, the Superintendent had a thin scabbard.

Within the automobile, a smell of smoke intensified. It came spilling out from under a dashboard. "Can you see what I am driving at?" asked the Ostrich, ducking the hideous beak under the dashboard. The automobile sped on toward the sunset, more or less out of control.

The Ostrich was Minister of Aviation in Jamskoni. It was he who had given ministerial approval for Reed to start work. It was he who was supposed to know so much about keeping Jamskoni under control.

Hector Reed shouted: "Does the Superintendent give you much trouble?" "Not what you would call trouble," the croak came out from under the dashboard, "but it is fairly clear that his career must terminate soon."

As in neighbouring countries, when independence became fashionable, Jamskoni had changed from colonial rule to self government. A parliament had been elected and public servants appointed.

One of the public servants had to be the Superintendent of Police. Finding himself in charge of a military force, and declaring publicly that the parliament was nonsense, the Superintendent strove toward a military dictatorship in Jamskoni. Already in the neighbouring countries, military dictatorships were fashionable.

"The Superintendent's career cannot continue much further," explained the Ostrich, "because his outlook is

not realistic enough." As the crater wall steepened under the automobile, the tyres revolved more slowly. The smoke under the dashboard accumulated. Instead of looking realistically out through the windscreen, the Ostrich was poking at tangled wiring down near the pilot's boots.

"But there's no point in worrying too much about the Superintendent, old bean. We do have other problems."

"You amaze me," said Reed. Hurtling blindly upward, the automobile was missing thorntrees by narrow margins.

In his own career, the Ostrich had been hurtling blindly upward even when colonialism was fashionable. Beginning as an office boy under the colonial rule, he had campaigned in democratic elections using an ostrich as a party symbol. Few people in Jamskoni could read, but on election papers, most had put a cross against the ostrich symbol.

After discarding the colonial rule, Jamskoni had begun to accept foreign aid. But even when there were no stipulated strings attached to it, the foreign aid did presuppose some measure of pressure from overseas.

A name given to the pressure was neocolonialism. And in fact, Hector Reed, whose stipend was paid overseas, constituted part of the pressure.

The Ostrich explained all this while the thorntrees and tamarisks swished by on both sides of the windscreen. When the automobile stumbled on the bit of erosion and lurched over the rim of the crater, the Ostrich came up from under the dashboard. The smoke had made his eyes more bloodshot. Smoke poured out of his nostrils.

"But you know Jamskoni fairly well already, old chap. You know that circumstances can make things worse than

they would otherwise be." "What Jamskoni needs is pepping up," snapped Reed, thumping a fist on to the plastic valise.

Once across the rim, and again illuminated by the sunset, the automobile leaped forward with renewed vigour. Hector Reed and the Ostrich swayed about while the tyres sprayed the sandy particles against polished bodywork.

The Ostrich grinned: "Things are beginning to move at last, Hector. The ministry of aviation received its first aircraft today. It will have to be tested." "High time the ministry was tested."

The bodywork, enamelled black, was gaudy with reflections of the sunset. As the tyres rolled across the sandy particles, the reflections flowed over the enamel.

When the automobile drifted around a tight circle, centrifugal force glued Reed to a door handle. The tight circle wrenched speed out of the tyres. Here was a technique of braking without endangering a brake pedal.

In struggling to retain balance, Reed tripped the handle. The door flapped open. Reed and the valise were unloaded. Holding the automobile stationary on the rim of the crater, the Ostrich said: "It is rare one sees such craftsmanship these days." Through the windscreen he was staring down into the crater. Parked inside a governmental workshop down there was a biplane.

Reed was knocking sandy particles off himself with both hands. He had been unloaded near a frayed canvas tent and a clapped-out bush vehicle. He snarled: "You must have drained the exchequer for this grade of equipment." The Ostrich did not look round. "With foreign aid," he explained, "it never pays to economize. If we don't economize the republic will probably become

bankrupt. But if we do economize then bankruptcy becomes certain." "That is it. A choice between probability and certainty." "We did not really buy the biplane, you know. It was a kind of donation from the coast."

Reed's skin became quilted in a current of air which was sluicing down through the bit of erosion. From a thousand miles away the current brought a scent of seaweed and rotting coral. "Are you still at war with the coast?" "Not exactly, Hector. It is only a trade agreement. They sent us the biplane on the dray of a lorry. We donate the automobile to the coast on the same lorry." "Justice."

As he spoke to Hector Reed and stared at the distant biplane, the Ostrich was trampling on flames which kept breaking out under the dashboard. Mechanics in the workshop had failed to clinch a battery in the automobile. Wires had shifted. Rubber flooring had smouldered. Now even the pilot's boots had become combustive.

"Listen, Ostrich," Reed was jumping up and down shaking sandy particles out of pockets, "is it true that hemp dealers come by this tent?" The Ostrich had alighted. He was holding the door open and kicking sand on to the smouldering rubber in the automobile. "During the day you might catch one or two, Hector. At night, of course, they are frightened of stepping on puff adders up here."

Followed by Reed, the Ostrich carried the plastic valise into shadow under the frayed canvas. "How can I know if a herder is smuggling hemp?" "It is a question of smell." "Oh." "You know how an antelope makes an odd smell when startled," explained the Ostrich. "Like that only not so strong."

Reed was still jumping up and down. His voice clicked into a higher key. He thumped fists on to the valise. "Let

us take a hypothetical case for instance," the higher key soaked into the frayed canvas: "Suppose a mob of smelly herders decide to throw this tent into the crater."

Under the shadow, the Ostrich was hard to see. His skinny fingers were unscrewing bakelite caps. Each time a cap came off he peered into a battery and untwisted a grin. The grin flashed enough illumination to reveal a level of distilled water inside the battery. "If the herders are un-cooperative, old bean, you ought to notify the ministry."

From the volcanic crater came shouts and leathery crashes. In response to the Superintendent's commands, the tribal policemen were stripping off tarbooshes and truncheons and strapping on crash helmets and shotguns. "Why don't we call in the police?" whined Reed. The Ostrich croaked: "The police have got their hands full already. They are trying to take over political control of Jamskoni."

A throbbing became audible in the crater and the Ostrich straightened up. Reed had snapped open the valise. He was taking clothing out and throwing it about the tent rather violently. "Herders are a sneaky lot," he whimpered. "They are always cutting camels' throats and draining out the blood."

The throbbing came from a generator which activated a lighting system in the government workshop. The Ostrich strode out of the tent and folded himself into the automobile. "On the grazing area," he called back, "a man's got to drink something."

As the automobile dived at speed into the crater, Hector Reed stood motionless. For several seconds he remained thus. True, he had been to Jamskoni before. And true, he did know something of the circumstances. His shoulders sagged and his chest crumpled. He

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swallowed, blinked, twitched his ears, sniffed. He kicked at the batteries in the tent.

Electronically induced, maybe, wasps had nested on the batteries. Reed knocked down the nests and kicked them outside.

Instead of rolling along the rim into a rainforest, the nests wandered right and left. Deferring to such bias then, Reed would trot outside and kick the nests either into the crater before the tent, or on to a grazing area behind it.

The grazing area stretched a thousand miles to the coast. By glancing across the thousand miles, Reed ascertained that nothing moved out there. Apart from a faint smell of hemp, the grazing area was empty.

From out the empty grazing area, between one nest and another, there appeared an elderly lady accompanied by a youthful donkey. The lady cackled into conversation while still half a mile from the tent.

The donkey was laden with paper sacks which gave off the faint smell of cannabis. The lady was laden with nothing except copper bangles encircling trunk and limbs. She clanked and glittered like a robot caterpillar.

Needing as much vernacular as he could absorb, Reed stared keenly at the lady as she cackled past the tent and over the rim of the crater. By moving his lower jaw sideways, Reed tuned his ears for altitude.

From amid writhing convolutions of the vernacular, a recognizable word for snake kept striking the ears. As she came past him, the elderly lady opened her mouth and pointed toward a digestive tract. She had no venom glands, but long yellow fangs curved inward toward the tract. "Do you mean you eat snakes?" asked Reed.

Unabated, the cackle traversed the bit of erosion and descended into the crater. After a few more nests, Reed

looked over the rim and noted that the crater was as empty as the grazing area.

Deflected upward by the coast, a final light of day touched Ol-Skoni's ice cap. Blocks of ice up there diffused the light across the grazing area. Dune after dune glowed.

Through an emission of crowded whispers from the rainforest, a faint clonking of camel bells came in from the dunes. The smell of hemp got stronger. Nightfall seemed to press out the smell.

Reed stripped off all clothing. Once free of friction from starched seams, he breathed deeply. He pinched nostrils between thumb and finger and ducked under the frayed canvas.

Along the rim of the crater, the whispers from the rainforest had intensified. There were no identifiable emissions. Merely mysterious voices. Diurnal creatures were grumbling about turning in and nocturnal creatures were grumbling about turning out.

Behind the rainforest, the dunes on the grazing area glowed less brightly. Reed stretched himself upon linen bedsheets within the tent. Thickening darkness triggered irresistible directives across a lifetime's memories. He slept.

Not long afterwards, however, despite the darkness and the directives, he was afflicted with insomnia. He kept rousing himself and muttering.

A kick at a waterfilter would have cured the insomnia. Apparently unaware of this, Hector Reed kept muttering and sweating. From a camp stretcher he peered out through open tent flaps. Out there, so he muttered, there was plenty to sweat about.

As was customary, the waterfilter consisted of two sections, one above the other. Water from the top had to

drip down through a porcelain candle into the bottom section. As drips accumulated, so air in the bottom became compressed. Also, the drips made soft thumps inside the waterfilter.

Each time he awoke, Reed looked toward the thumps. They sounded like footsteps.

The waterfilter was of aluminium. At a critical compression, the top section would jump and some air would escape. Then with a clatter, which kept waking Reed, the waterfilter would settle back and reassemble itself. The thumps would continue while Reed sweated himself back to sleep.

Since the drips thumped with precision, Hector Reed awoke at regular intervals. Anxiety after anxiety would drain through pores of his reassembled mind. And when pressures became too great, he would jump up from the camp stretcher and peer out through the tent flaps.

In order to repel a python, the canvas flaps on Reed's tent were always tied open. If tied shut, with Reed inside, the tent would heat up and become a haven for the python.

Since its yawn was narrower than Reed's shoulders, the python was reckoned to be harmless. Certainly it was a nuisance. Being as tame as a housecat, it was always hanging around.

Without being younger than Reed, the python was nevertheless clumsier. Of a night, while a monsoon was swishing through the rainforest, it could be heard slashing and smashing at foliage as coils skidded off smooth boughs.

Perhaps the coils were too old for adequate control. At any rate, the control was so inadequate that the slashing and smashing brought Reed out of the tent into bright starlight.

Not having eaten for a month, the python was thin. Moreover, having laid a couple of dozen eggs, the python was exhausted. And having sat on the eggs for too long, the python was stiff. It wound down out of the rainforest like a chain off a winch.

Hector Reed lit a tilley lamp. Hanging hammock fashion between the rainforest and a candelabra tree, the python watched. A triangular head peered at Reed.

Since its eyes were sealed beneath a layer of skin, the python could weep without shedding tears. The skin was aged. The eyes peered dimly. In the starlight, a white stripe across a nose resembled a grin.

While staring back at the grin, Reed scorched a finger on the lamp. His hair was disarrayed. Incandescence was hissing from the lamp but no answering gleam came from the python, nor from the candelabra tree.

The candelabra tree was as dead as cardboard. The python shifted a coil. Part of the tree tore away. When the triangular head thudded down beside him, Reed shuddered.

The python's hide was so out of repair that a confusion pattern of tan blotches was all but obliterated. There were scars where antelope horns had pierced out from inside before digesting away and falling off. There were welts where baboons had nipped the coils.

The hide ought to have gleamed in the incandescence like patent leather. Instead, it was as drab as leaf mould. It smelled of rotting rainforest.

Hector Reed patted the python by stroking against a grain of scales. Male pythons stroked females in such a way. They ran their chins along the females, always against the grain.

Now, as Reed patted, a resonance came from within the python. It was rather like stroking a violin.

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The coils were as chilled as cold-water pipes, rigid and rusty. Flakes came away in Reed's fingers.

Maybe mistaking the incandescence for sunlight, the python skidded slowly forward and basked. It closed no eyelids, but it seemed to fall asleep. Reed sighed.

Attracted by the lamp, some mosquitoes floated up from the crater and over the rim. Soon Reed stopped patting the python and started patting the mosquitoes.

The tilley lamp radiated incandescence in all directions. Masked by the rim, however, the radiation went across the crater rather than into it. The crater was full of darkness.

Apart from the python and the mosquitoes, no other inhabitants were illuminated by the tilley lamp. Most people remained indoors at night.

Like people elsewhere, whose self government had begun when a colonial financial year ended, the people of Jamskoni were unaggressive. Married farmers they were mostly who migrated from upland to upland so that crops might rotate with turf. They subsisted on snuff, venison, flying ants, millet beer and jowari.

Having survived ceremonial circumcision as teenagers, neither the farmers nor their wives sought further excitement. True, sporadic skirmishes did occur between clans. But by European standards such warfare was gentle and chivalrous.

Now that foreign experts were giving advice on modern methods, it seemed likely that the warfare would assume more civilized proportions. Hector Reed was one of the experts.

Of a daytime in Jamskoni, excitement was scarce. Hillsides were smudgy with haze from cooking fires and murmurous with choruses from upland farms. Sometimes coffee flowers discharged perfume and sometimes

termite heaps discharged delicacies. Always there was hot sunlight and cold air. Everywhere lava rocks imparted tremors from mountain torrents.

As a rule, the excitement intensified at night. During the night, leopards extended their claws, and acacia trees extended their thorns. Puff adders flopped about on footpaths and elephants floated about on airstrips. Scuffles went on between owls and mice, hyenas and gnus, mongooses and cobras. And now Hector Reed was in conflict with the python.

Merely by basking about, the python impeded Reed. Before reaching across the coils for the tilley lamp, Reed had to lick his fingers. The lamp sizzled. While nudging a handle with a thumbnail, Reed chirped conversationally. The python did not budge.

Nudging and chirping he managed to grasp the handle. Blinking, he stepped toward the tent. Swinging from the handle, the lamp gave Reed a shadow which lapped across the crater.

He stepped into the tent whose darkness drained away through laceholes. A table rocked under the lamp. The handle fell with a clank. Kerosene within the lamp sloshed here and there. Intermittently the table was jerked by the sloshing.

The canvas flaps tied open formed an entrance for the tent. With them, as extensions to his ears, Reed could listen to the crater.

As no air moved in it, the tent was hot. The incandescence from the tilley lamp hissed back and forth between the canvas flaps. There was a pong of insecticide and an overall smear of sloppy housekeeping.

Every time Reed sighed, the camp stretcher creaked. Some weaver-birds kept answering the creak with musical pops and bubbles. They were camped down a dry

watercourse which began as a trench around the tent and continued as erosion between the rim and the floor of the crater.

Sighing and creaking, Reed huddled on the camp stretcher and dangled fingers between shins. Sweat formed along his ribs like dew along corrugated iron and drained into the linen bedsheets.

Because of the pops and bubbles from the weaver-birds, the crater was difficult to read. As the difficulty increased, Reed sighed harder. The stretcher creaked louder. A distant hyena gave a bellow. Reed shivered.

After the triangular head had bumped the shins two or three times, Reed kicked the python up on to the camp stretcher. Stiffly the python transferred coil after coil from the stretcher to the table. The table rocked. The stretcher creaked. The weaver-birds answered. The crater became illegible.

A half moon had set and Jamskoni was under pressure of the starlight. Within the crater, undercurrents of sound flowed vaguely but, because of the darkness, colours floated vividly.

Under the starlight, the watercourse was a bluish stain down a wall of the crater. Where the stain ended, a glow of embers indicated where some tribal policemen were cooking a meal. During the day they reinforced Jamskoni and during the night they reinforced themselves.

The tribal policemen were sitting around in a hollow circle on the sandy floor close to a coolness which exuded from an ancient well. There might have been about two hundred of them. One or two clattered and rattled with wooden stirrers inside cooking pots. Most of them listened to an address by the Superintendent.

Against the sandy floor, khaki shorts and strawberry sweaters of the tribal policemen were difficult to discern.

What stood out brightly were metallic glints on crash helmets and regimental shotguns.

Farther out on the sandy floor, the governmental workshop was a cavern of light. The Ostrich could be seen out there. He was man-handling a drum of petrol.

He was a bony figure in garage overalls flickering about like a moth. The drum was far too fat for the Ostrich but not nearly so tall.

Every time it bumped the tilley lamp, the python on the table curled into a tight spiral. Reed sniffed. He pulled up a blade of bamboo grass from between the shins. The blade tasted fresher than the singed python.

The blade was juicy with sultriness from a far-off coast. But it was edged with a ratchet serration which caused it to creep down Reed's epiglottis.

Seeping over the rim and into the crater, a monsoon was bringing the sultriness from the coast and leaving it as dew on the bamboo grass. Stirred by the monsoon, the grass was tickling the shins. Hairs were picking up tassel seeds whose stickiness increased with the dew.

It had been dismally sultry on the coast yesterday so tonight upcountry Reed had to cut his throat. The serration wore into his epiglottis.

Over in the governmental workshop, the Ostrich was pumping petrol from the drum into cowling on twin engines. Like a lot of pilots, he had a habit of shaking the cowling to coax in a few last drops. The habit never succeeded. The hyena bellowed again.

Beginning as a bovine moo, the bellow deteriorated into a feline yiaou. Reed sighed. Wiredrag bracings on the biplane trembled as the cowling weighed.

As the bellow approached, Reed extracted a dinner suit from the plastic valise and dressed himself. He carried the tilley lamp out of the tent and hooked it to

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the candelabra tree. He unscrewed a pressure valve. The lamp sighed. The incandescence faded in a few seconds.

The few seconds illuminated him as Reed shoved a bush vehicle over the rim. While the vehicle cascaded off basalt ledges down the dry watercourse, he hurled himself aboard and navigated.

He chopped some tamarisks into chaff. He fired a motor by engaging a high gear and then releasing a clutch.

Prior to firing, the engine seized. Momentarily, the vehicle stopped cascading. Reed stood up and drove his head through a tattered canopy. When the motor fired he sat down again. He honked a motorhorn by inserting a copper wire in a hole on a steering column.

Cobwebs of darkness were hanging down the watercourse. The floor of the crater galloped about under beams from rattling headlamps. A few thorntrees arose and combed out tatters in the canopy. The weaver-birds exploded in a mishmash of shredded nests and scrambled eggs.

Tyre pressures as usual were far too great. The basalt ledges became steel sledges bashing at Reed's chassis. Relative to the vehicle, the monsoon began to seep backwards, cooling friction in the bashing.

On rounding the ancient well, Reed accelerated. There were mosquitoes at the well whose legs were spotted with white. Moreover, there was an eighty-foot doum palm sprouting a thousand dates in a ripening bunch.

Near the ancient well, broad cooking pots and narrow policemen glistened with illumination from the embers. The two hundred crash helmets were arranged around the circle like rounds in a machine-gun belt. The two hundred shotguns rested across the knees of the sitting policemen.

Jowari mash was fuming in the cooking pots. The wooden stirrers churned and thumped.

The bush vehicle disturbed the embers and drew flames of vernacular from the Superintendent of Police. Reed wrenched at the steering column. To change direction on the sandy floor he had to ricochet. Clods of sand spurted sideways from the ricocheting vehicle.

The doum palm gesticulated with pinnate leaves twenty feet long. The ripening bunch was harvested while the crash helmets clunked and bonged under the thousand dates.

Levelling off on the sandy floor, Reed swerved along an airstrip which he located by feeling a murram bedding with the chassis. He braked at an end of the airstrip by leaving the gear engaged and switching off the motor. He parked by drifting sideways on to a cement tarmac.

Already parked on the tarmac was the Ostrich's automobile. Its aerial was flexed down and clinched to a tail light. When the bush vehicle shattered the tail light, the aerial whipped upright and swished. Over in the governmental workshop, the Ostrich stopped pumping.

The tarmac was in front of the whitewashed steps which led up to the old colonial club. Leaving the vehicle to drip sump oil on to the cement, Reed stepped up on to a veranda of the club.

In shadows along the veranda, the dinner suit was invisible. Desert boots rubbed softly upon glazed tiles.

There had always been a shortage of keys for the colonial club. District officers proceeding on leave had often forgotten to return them. Because of such vacational amnesia, Reed now pushed at entrance after entrance as he rubbed along the veranda. The entrances pushed back at him.

Over at the ancient well, the jowari mash was being

poured from pot to pot while clods of sand and green dates were being flicked out. The cooking pots scorched the tribal policemen's hands.

Along the veranda of the colonial club, glass doors had been installed at the entrances to seal off air-conditioning. Because the club was in darkness, Reed's view in each door was identical with the view as seen from within. Against reflections of the starlight, he could see a silhouette of his own face blinkered by cupped hands.

Inside the colonial club, a cockroach was lashing feelers at silver paper in a cigarette packet. It sounded like a buffalo trampling furniture. Several mosquitoes were trying to get through the glass away from the air-conditioning. The air-conditioning had ducts above the veranda so that a hedge of hibiscus and pomegranate kept trembling under drops of water.

Hector Reed proceeded along the veranda pressing hands against door after door and staring in through the glass at his own reflection. A moment or so after he had passed it, one of the doors gave a click. Immediately the desert boots squeaked on the glazed tiles. Hector Reed moved back toward the click.

His own reflection slid across the glass as the door opened. A hinge chirped like a cricket. A chill of air-conditioning jumped into Reed's nose and made his eyes ache. A blast of police-whistle jumped into Reed's skull and made his ears ring. The door swung shut and clicked again.

Lacing and unlacing fingers across the skull, Reed jumped about on tiptoe. Growls were coming across the crater from the tribal policemen.

Within the club, the police-whistle gave another blast. Through the glass door Mrs Buccleuch said in English: "What are you doing here?" Reed's hands thrust against

the glass. "Come to that," he hissed, "what are you doing here?"

As reflections in the glass door, the tribal policemen were hard to see. But their boots could be heard slogging along the murram bedding of the airstrip. Upon hearing the police-whistle, they had deployed away from the ancient well.

Approaching at speed along the murram, the policemen maintained a formation not unlike a bulge in a fishing net. Both ends of the net were advanced. "Why, Heckie Reed," cried Mrs Buccleuch upon opening the door, "that is none of your business."

Under stress, Reed's hands skidded on the swinging glass and hurtled across Mrs Buccleuch's shoulders. A shoulderstrap became dislocated. She laughed. "Then I make it my business," yapped Reed whose fingers had grappled on to a bony joint between clavicle and humerus. The fingers became embedded in plump flesh.

The policemen were hardly more visible than turbulence in the monsoon. But, in the starlight, the shotguns stood out at a high port.

Mrs Buccleuch shrugged a shoulder. The grappling fudged. Stitches tore out of the shoulderstrap. She nudged Reed with the shoulder and she leaned. He avoided collapse by clutching. With a certain amount of collaboration he found himself exerting a wrestling grip.

By twisting the bony joint, Reed manipulated her. Mrs Buccleuch's plump thighs, encased in knee-breeches, reacted as stabilizers to the twisting. She waltzed on to the veranda between him and the tribal policemen. But since she had jabbed a finger through a buttonhole in the dinner suit, Reed was restrained.

Mrs Buccleuch was impeding Reed's entry into the colonial club. She had never acquired a habit of hospita-

lity even though she used to accept a lot. She never went into purdah. She ate bacon for breakfast. She wore knee-breeches. And she used to laugh at Ramadan.

A varnished finger-nail left a poisonous scratch across Reed's ribs. The dinner suit was wrenched out of shape. Murmuring: "That's what you think," Mrs Buccleuch rubbed a hairdo up under Reed's chin. The hairdo tasted of vaseline.

The dislocated shoulderstrap belonged to a tight-fitting blouse whose zip fastener coincided with a column of vertebrae. The vertebrae and the blouse were lashed together by a waistband which itself was bisected by a zip.

The kneebreeches were as tight-fitting as the blouse and similarly fastened along the vertebrae. Seen from the tarmac, Mrs Buccleuch was a seedpod designed to burst along preordained lines. "Yes," gasped Reed, "that is exactly what I think."

Hector Reed peeped over the hairdo at the tribal policemen who were coming across the tarmac. A spasm went through his fingers and the blouse disclosed several thoracic vertebrae. The zip fastener flapped open. It had been lubricated with graphite pencil.

"Would you mind pulling your finger out?" whispered Reed into the hairdo. He was articulating whichever way the finger-nail happened to indicate. Through the flapping zip, a brassière strap was revealed. The plump flesh swelled under the strap.

Since the tribal policemen were running in step, the regimental shotguns undulated in unision. "Let us get inside the air-conditioning," hissed Reed. "It is too close out here." Mrs Buccleuch said: "I can feel your heart beating." She tucked herself into the dinner suit.

The zip fasteners had opened past the waistband and

the kneebreeches were relaying a chain reaction. A good deal of Mrs Buccleuch was revealed. Laughter inside her made Mrs Buccleuch swell and heave. Coming directly from the air-conditioning, she felt like refrigerated mutton.

Hector Reed stared down the column of vertebrae at the advancing policemen. He tried to push Mrs Buccleuch's shoulders together.

He kept moving both hands here and there, kneading the flesh into a more compact loaf. It was like trying to prevent overleavened bread from rising.

On the brassière strap, the starlight glanced off a plastic hook which was attached by a couple of threads. Upheavals in the plump flesh were transmitting strains through the threads. Mrs Buccleuch gave a laugh and the threads snapped.

Fumes of simmering jowari came with the tribal policemen. Reed sniffed and edged toward the glass door. "You recognize this perfume?" asked Mrs Buccleuch. "Does it send you?"

From the cement the tribal policemen came up through the hibiscus hedge. Still in step, they crashed their boots in concert on the glazed tiles. Mrs Buccleuch shrieked. "Don't move, madam," shouted Reed. "I am going to zip you up."

She crushed past him into the club and smashed his hand with the glass door. The door clicked shut while Reed whipped the hand about as though dispersing mosquitoes. Flaunting full-length unfastenings, Mrs Buccleuch receded into the darkness.

A cloud was gliding overhead and the starlight was dodgy. In such dodginess, the blasts on the police-whistle conferred impunity on any policeman with a running grudge.

Waving the shotguns and leaping about, the policemen came along the veranda. Momentarily, Reed crouched. Then he hopped about in a contrapuntal rhythm.

As it glided past, the cloud overhead bounced extra starlight on to the veranda. Not only did the tribal policemen become easier to see but, more importantly, Reed's dinner suit became more discernible. Out on the tarmac, the Superintendent of Police could be seen leaning on the Ostrich's automobile. He was gazing into it through the windscreen.

Reed shouted a greeting at the Superintendent in hairy vernacular. The Superintendent looked toward the veranda for a moment then spoke some command to the policemen.

The Superintendent of Police never spoke English. In fact, he had had less training than any of them. Basically, he wore the same uniform as the tribal policemen. But snippets of leopard skin were sewn here and there on the khaki. And the tarboosh on his skull was fashioned from crocodile skin whose bony scutes functioned as standoffs.

Brittle tufts of hair stuck out from beneath the tarboosh and his earlobes had been dragged down to his elbows. Reed slipped a finger into the dinner suit and whipped out a banknote.

The tribal policemen had been trained by colonial officers. In the extra starlight from the gliding cloud, Reed's appearance triggered inhibitions within them.

Regarding Reed from mud-coloured pits in a flat face, the Superintendent withdrew the simi knife from its sheath. Reed thereupon extracted a second banknote from the dinner suit.

While crackling the banknotes, Reed wrapped forearms around his belly. The simi was not an all-round

tool capable of opening cans and whittling masks. It had a slender blade whose length allowed it to touch a man's heart after piercing his belly. There was no need to risk deflection by stabbing through the ribs.

The Superintendent shoved the simi knife through a rubber edging on a butterfly window and tripped a door handle inside the automobile. The door swung open.

Directing the shotguns so that barrels converged upon him, the tribal policemen stood about Reed. The Superintendent uttered a command and hammers on the shotguns snicked back in unison. Reed edged away from the glass door so that some of the shotguns pointed through him at the Superintendent. Then he fell off the veranda.

While edging away, Reed had managed to get one of his desert boots mauled by an elephant skull. As a rule, the skull was used to prop glass doors open on cold nights. But tonight it was out on the tiles, half hidden by the hibiscus hedge, where anyone could trip over it.

Like a cat, Reed landed upon the cement tarmac. He was undamaged except for a knee worn out of the dinner suit. The tribal policemen shouted with laughter.

Last time it had been ironed, the dinner suit had trapped a spider. In a manner of pressed flowers, spider legs now adorned the banknotes.

As Reed wobbled upright on the tarmac, the Superintendent leaned out of the automobile, snatching the banknotes and the spiderlegs. Reed accelerated as he moved ahead.

Over in the governmental workshop, the Ostrich was tinkering at a twin engine. The engine revved. A slipstream of warm air came past carrying a spindle core of whirling sand.

The sand tinkled in Reed's teeth and peppered the worn-out knee. Hunching lower, he galloped along the

airstrip. The desert boots shovelled sand every time they articulated.

Moving back toward the ancient well, the tribal policemen gave out bursts of laughter and imitations of the police-whistle. They kept falling about on the sandy floor.

Bedded though it was on murram, the airstrip was nevertheless spread with sand. The monsoon had spread the sand and moulded transversal ripples. Footprints from the desert boots floated away across the ripples.

The hyena wheezed into another bellow. Hector Reed stepped out. Glowing with inner secretions, he attracted the mosquitoes from the ancient well.

He stumbled on depressions where the weaver-birds had made sandbaths. The depressions slowed him. He muttered. Tribal policemen were losing self respect and all over was a crumbling of topography. The monsoon was licking the sandbaths away. Dung beetles slithered about like cakes of soap in the frothy sand. Borders along the airstrip were planted with aloes whose leaves were like knives. The mosquitoes pricked Reed when he slowed. The aloes slashed him when he veered. Thus shepherded he maintained a steady course.

"Do you need some help?" he called upon arriving at the governmental workshop. The hyena bellowed again. Reed hurried into the workshop with a chin twisted back over a shoulder. The Ostrich stood up from where a toolbox was displayed. "Why don't you get married, old chap?" he asked. "It would pay you in the long run."

Ah, of course. Solve your problems by increasing them. Reed gazed back into the starlight. "If it had no policemen, Jamskoni would not need them," he snapped. The Ostrich's skull gaped into a facial cave. His voice was a croak which echoed among ivory tusks and vines of

saliva. "Mrs Buccleuch's divorce will come through eventually, what?" He wore a polished leather jacket over a suit of overalls. The polish caught lizards of brightness from the lighting system. It gleamed in an oily rippling.

"Is it ministerial policy to have club members molested, Mr Ostrich?" "The club closed down when self government opened up, Mr Reed. We use it as a passenger hall for the airport."

The Ostrich turned back to the toolbox. Across shoulders of the leather jacket, whose pleats were supposed to permit freedom of action, there was an effigy of an ostrich. Every time the Ostrich went into action, the pleats gaped and the effigy grinned.

The effigy reinforced the Ostrich so that he could loaf supine under the twin engines without wearing out shoulder-blades. Reed said: "The grazing area is stinking with hemp." "Splendid, splendid." "Exactly what does that mean?" "It means you are taking your work seriously." "It is all in writing," snarled Reed.

On his skull, the Ostrich had jammed a nineteen-twenty flying helmet with earflaps snapped upright. He resembled some Siberian dignitary. The overalls had been buttoned to bony ankles, and the Ostrich's feet had been driven into furry boots.

On Reed's dinner suit, grease from the biplane was unnoticeable. A razor-blade had been used to gash buttonholes at shin level so that cuffs could be threaded through. An effect of cyclist's leggings was achieved.

Even if the cuffs kept falling out and getting frayed, it mattered little. The frayed cuffs healed eventually under the grease. Already, for instance, the worn-off knee was forming a closed scar.

The Ostrich was saying: "Even if she is not divorced,

Mrs Buccleuch would suit you. Jamskoni is broad-minded enough for a little bigamy." "Look here, Ostrich," Reed's voice crackled like a Very light, "is Jamskoni broadminded enough for a drink or two in the workshop?"

"Right you are, Hector. There is a crate of cans up behind the pilot's seat." The Ostrich swung a propeller as he spoke. Reed looked at him sharply, but the Ostrich gazed levelly at gauges attached to a nacelle.

Narrow eyed, Hector Reed peered along the sandy floor to where a crater wall terminated the airstrip. All was blackness. Gritty with clicks from police equipment, military commands were floating out there after having been shouted around the embers. "Black scum," muttered Reed. "White trash," added the Ostrich. "I was wondering," said Reed, "if you can remember enough about the crater wall to jump over it without seeing it."

The Ostrich was fiddling with a small dashboard in the biplane then dashing out to tap gauges attached to the nacelles. He wrenched off the helmet and steamed a little. He was gaunt and bony with eyes bloodshot to a luminous degree and teeth sharpened into tusks. Even in overalls he wore a public-school necktie.

"Nothing serious," he said when an engine burst into flames. He untwitched a pair of wires and the flames were extinguished. "Just the mixture is sort of—ah—rich and rough."

"Next time you crawl up into the pilot's seat, Ostrich, you might toss down a can or two." "Help yourself, old bean," not always did the Ostrich respond adequately to simple English. Reed levered himself up through a side hatch and crawled forward into the biplane's nose.

When the biplane began trundling along the airstrip, Reed was huddled behind the pilot's seat, picking bam-

boo tassels off his shins. Occasionally he looked ahead through a vee-shaped windshield. But what kept sending him back to the bamboo was an illusion of giddy speed in the biplane.

Since his ears were plugged with cotton wool, Hector Reed was spared a good deal of engine noise, although, strangely enough, the Ostrich's voice came through fairly clearly.

Even before an undercarriage started rolling, the biplane had begun vibrating like an express train. The Ostrich had released the undercarriage by leaning out and jerking at cords attached to chocks. Thereafter, the sandbaths in the airstrip aggravated the vibrations. Speed was insufficient.

The biplane hurtled toward the wall, which could not be seen across the sandbaths which could distinctly be felt. "Jolly good show, what?" croaked the Ostrich. "Marvellous," moaned Reed.

All day the crater had been gathering heat. Now the heat was rising thus drawing in the monsoon down the crater wall. The Ostrich explained all this as he manœuvred between the rising heat and the falling coolness.

Reed yelled at the twin engines to forgo their tricks. The crater wall became no less invisible as they cut along an inclined surface of the starlight.

Splutters from the twin engines coincided with extra sandbaths on the airstrip. A clout on the dashboard cured the splutters. The sandbaths fell away. Reed wrapped a forearm around his stomach and several fingers around his forehead. The biplane was floating. "Once you get used to it, flying must become monotonous," cried Hector Reed.

After floating in hot air from the crater's centre, the biplane sank in cool air at the crater wall. The cool air

contained an occasional flick of willy-nilly, intermittent doldrums, and the coastal monsoon. "Monotonous indeed," replied the Ostrich, "except of course for the landings."

Reed's face stretched thinner. He pushed at a side vector so that the monsoon came in and flicked at the thinness. "Well, that is a nice prospect," he cried and the Ostrich croaked: "Glorious. Venus is like an orange up in the sky."

The starlight was radiating down from a tightly-packed universe. The universe was conglomerate marble whose every speck was luminous. High against the speckled luminosity, Ol-Skoni mountain leaned, opaquely submerged in a lather of lights. "What do you mean about landings?" came tersely from Reed.

Through celluloid side windows, Venus appeared more yellow and less blue. The Ostrich ought to have been staring ahead through the windshield. He fidgeted with a wheel and column and made a pass over a couple of throttles. He said: "I say. Look at the tommies. Starlight makes them sort of twitchy, eh?" "Do you mean landings are harder in the dark?"

The starlight smudged the sandy floor of the crater. Non-shattering glass in the windshield had an optical effect that made distant objects seem more distant and near objects nearer. In flashing from distant to near, the objects gave an illusion of giddy speed.

"Have you ever wondered," asked the Ostrich, "why there is a rainforest along the rim of the crater? At the rim, passing thunderstorms lose support from rising air in the crater. . ." The biplane swooped near a swarm of firebeetles which were dancing in pairs. Then the pairs became eyes for a herd of tommy gazelles.

"Don't hurry over the discourse," snarled Reed. "The

crater wall will take at least five seconds to hit us." The Ostrich stirred at the wheel and column. The biplane swerved.

The twin engines bounced echoes off the rim. The biplane zipped about like a bat. The Ostrich swerved as the echoes dopplered.

Cool air pouring down the crater wall conferred less buoyancy. While the side vector flicked the monsoon on to his face, Hector Reed compensated for a drop in temperature by raising his voice. "For a good clean up," he shouted, "there is nothing like a fast dash through the rainforest."

The monsoon became flavoured with rotting vegetation which clung to the rim of the crater and fed on maimed thunderstorms. By a jack-knife flip, the biplane vaulted over a canopy of the rainforest while its centre of gravity passed beneath.

The canopy, supported by trunks and branches, was unbroken. Under the starlight it appeared to be a blanket of white wool. Red-flowering cork-bark trees among cedars were black lacework across woolly whiteness. Many of the trunks and branches had perished long ago. They were held upstanding by a crisscross of living lianas.

Beyond the rim, the rotting vegetation dried out and a grazing area stretched away on a slight subsidence. Here the biplane was coasting downhill. It cut directly into the monsoon which had rippled in from a far-off ocean. Even upcountry, the ripples had not abated.

In doldrums here and there among the ripples, the biplane darted. Inertia kept knocking Reed's head back against a bulkhead.

Some marabou storks, rising off a queue of hyenas around an unidentified corpse, came past like mortar

bombs in a barrage. "It gets so dangerous if you climb above the dunes," yelled Reed.

At almost two miles a minute, the biplane roared out over the grazing area. Crests of dunes were shiny from the starlight. Streaks of loess, laid down by the monsoon, were black lines across the shininess.

The Ostrich stared at the dunes. His bones twisted and creaked. His skull rotated and recovered. But at times he appeared to lose interest.

A biblical urge to control the universe had been superimposed upon a koranic urge to let the universe control him. A British adolescence had hardly obliterated a Jamskoni childhood.

The dunes came past at windshield level. Rolling waves in a petrified sea. They prevented the biplane from shooting forward in a straight line.

Perhaps the Ostrich was evoking memory of some caravan route. He swayed about as though maintaining balance on a wooden saddle. Each sway was syncopated by Reed's skull tapping against the side windows. The biplane snaked down along the grazing area, avoiding the dunes like a pigeon avoiding falcons. The grazing area was an outside edge of a spinning planet. Dawn was momentary, but sunrise continued until noon.

When rays of the sunrise struck him, goosepimples flattened out all over Hector Reed. He unwrapped arms from around the dinner suit. "Good morning," roared the Ostrich as the sunrise like a taste of myrrh dried out Reed's nose. "Muga mono," said Reed.

Hector Reed pushed at the side vector so that it opened wider. The Ostrich was navigating toward a baobab tree. More monsoon came in through the vector. The baobab grappled for admission also.

Shrunken among roots of the baobab tree was an old

man in a bile-covered blanket. Even while asleep, his lips were moving. Metal beads were passing through fingers in time with the lips. Some white goats pottered among incense trees.

While the monsoon was shoving Reed back against the bulkhead, the Ostrich extended a bony hand and clicked the vector shut. The baobab fell away sideways. "Aerodynamics, you understand," shouted the Ostrich.

The Ostrich's smile seemed to be falling apart like an over-pickled olive. Structural saliva stitched the smile together.

The incense trees had dead limbs. Cores of timber had dried out and shrunk so that the limbs were hung in loose sleeves of bark. They groped toward the baobab.

In a bath of sunrise, cool shadows of dawn clung like bubbles to the incense trees. Shadowy lions drifted within the bubbles.

The biplane circumnavigated the baobab. The shadows of dawn drifted swiftly on the outer edge, and the old man mumbled gratitude. Then the biplane sailed toward the sunrise against a traffic of pastureflies.

The baobab tree marked a frontier between Jamskoni and a coastal sheikhdom. Shoved against a cantilever barrier nearby was a finger-board in Arabic characters warning of hardship and starvation. Disease and deprivation.

The barrier was extended across an ant-bed roadway. Since its base was badly tamped, the finger-board pointed wherever the monsoon blew. And because the monsoon changed direction twice yearly, the hardship and starvation were evenly distributed, between Jamskoni and the sheikhdom.

The smile on the Ostrich would not have been so bad but for a deliberate scar on a cheek. Herders from the

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sheikhdom had sculpted the scar during the Ostrich's boyhood. Either he had been captured and tortured, or he had been invited and honoured. It depended on which way the monsoon blew.

Below the biplane were some bushes. Their roots somehow managed to support a hillock of thorns on a plain of dust. The monsoon had spent all night gnawing at the dust. And at dawn several camels came grinding at the thorns.

The camels were applying rubbery lips. Physically the thorns were piquant enough but chemically they were insipid. They were as tasty as broken glass.

The camels ground them between sliding jaws and packed the thorns into their rumens. There was a stumbling of hobbled legs, a clonking of wooden bells, and a dribbling of green saliva.

The thorns had cooled during the night and combed dew out of the monsoon. Each thorn transfixed a drop. Myriads of drops were catching the sunrise and twisting it in all directions. The bushes scintillated.

Having brushed a little scintillation off the bushes and used it, not for drinking, but for ritual ablutions, a dozen or so herders were gathering around a transistor radio.

Papersacks of hemp had been erected as a wall to ward off the monsoon. Lines of poetry, issuing from the radio, were curling back against the wall.

The herders knelt on mats. A dew crust beneath the mats crumbled and gave up coolness into their knees.

The herders gasped as the poetry uncoiled. Pink tongues flicked over seared lips as though tracing its filaments by flavour. Reception was at its best about sunrise. A thread that life hung by seemed somehow stronger then.

The poetry came from the coastal sheikhdom. Up-

country in Jamskoni, there was a vernacuiar which was spelled exactly as it was written, but down on the coast there was no orthography. Without scripts, radio announcers down there had to memorize news bulletins. The poetry was an aid to memorizing. It was an aid carried over from koranic school.

When the poetry crackled with electrical interference, the herders wrinkled foreheads as brittle as old papyrus. They wound their skirts into turbans upon their heads and took up spears. A nearby hornbill nodded.

Unwrapping wings as broad as bokhara rugs, the hornbill lurched forward on broadening steps. Turbulence flowed into the bushes and blew the dew into rain. Each wingbeat soughed through the thorns. Each dewfall hissed an accompaniment.

Slowly shaking out the rugs and leaning upon them, the hornbill thrust itself forward. It put rumples into the monsoon. Dust arose in claw-sized puffs which dilated into pastel smudges and drifted with the rumples.

Magnetos in the biplane were putting crackles into the poetry. Like a locust, yellow with pregnancy, the biplane was dropping lower to the dew crust.

The biplane trembled on a verge of stalling. The hornbill soared past it.

Zip fasteners in canvas fuselage were spanking at spruce ribs. Landing wheels groped from side to side. Vibrations from the twin engines were being taken up by the thorns. All the camels bucked and staggered. Legs became creased by hobbles. A few cloth plugs fell from the camels' necks and venous blood formed dripping lines.

The herders ran to the camels. They twitched at neck veins until the dripping stopped. They turned upon the biplane.

As the herders gestured with the spears toward it, the biplane wobbled. They lowered the spears and stared. They repeated the gesture and again the wobble occurred.

The wobble in the biplane belonged to Hector Reed. He was sitting behind the Ostrich and throwing elbows about. He was struggling to shield his eyes not only from the sunrise but also from the scintillation. "You can't beat it for a good headache," he whimpered. On a level with the eyes, myriads of prickly knots in the Ostrich's hair glistened with sweat beads.

Reed was scowling and flopping about. The Ostrich was smiling and straining at the wheel and column.

Each time the herders raised the spears, Reed would jerk his face back from the side windows. The biplane would wobble. The Ostrich would enlarge the smile and reduce the wobble with hand and foot movements.

The Ostrich's pupils were pinpoints between narrowed eyelids. Curled down on a shuddering leather seat, he was peering out through the vee-shaped windshield. He manipulated the wheel and column and kicked at rudder bars.

Heaped up into dunes, the plain of dust put bumps into the monsoon. The biplane bounced and twitched. Reed groaned. "Can't you loop the loop?" he yelled.

He was slumped in a posture of an exhausted rider. A crate he sat on, like a rickety saddle, rattled his bones. Cans in the crate were riveting rims on to his behind. They were grinding squeaks out of each other. Sweat from his face was shaking into the crate and damping the squeaks.

He slapped at the crate with a spike. By locking its lug on to a rim, he could twist the spike and pierce a can. But the spike kept slipping off. More he sweated, more

it slipped. Soon it slithered out of his fingers into the crate.

Upon stooping, Reed pumped blood into his face. In retrieving the spike, his fingers were pinched by the cans. He wiped sweat from the eyes. He wept.

In response to the waving spears, the biplane was wobbling its wings. Disturbed by the wobbling, the camels were lacerating themselves on the thorns. Herds were becoming mixed up. The herders were shouting in guttural twitters about who owned which part of what mix up.

The spears wobbled. The biplane waved. The camels panicked.

Doubling a knee under a chin, Hector Reed clamped a desert boot on to a can. He locked the spike on to the can's rim and twisted his tongue out between his teeth.

The camels broke the hobbles. The biplane swerved. The spike slipped. The knee jolted the chin. The teeth sank into the tongue.

Springing upward, the spike flicked sparks off a vee-shaped patch of sunrise. Reed's head clonked back against the bulkhead. "It just struck me," he sobbed as a weal between the eyes became suffused. "I must have malaria."

He lay the weal forward against the pilot's seat. Rubbing it about, he located and consumed areas of coolness. Shudders in the seat shook a smear of sweat into a rivulet on the leather.

"Malaria, Hector?" A shovel of a shout rasped from the Ostrich. For a space the monsoon buffeted the biplane. Then the shout added: "We ought to be getting back."

A bony hand crawled around behind the pilot's seat and grappled on to Reed's ribs. The hand was calloused

to a remarkable degree. Ridges of horniness had arisen here and there like welts on a chamois glove. Bruises and blood blisters smelled of a distillation of wood tar, which was used to exterminate borers in the spruce ribs.

The hand was overheated from overwork. Curving nails flared under sparks of sunrise. The nails hacked and clawed at strata beneath Hector Reed's ribs. "Tell me if it hurts, old bean. The airstrip will be rather hard to locate. Even though it is uphill it is still below ground level."

Yelps from Reed were buried under the Ostrich's gravel voice: "We shall have to poke around until we can pinpoint it." Since the plain of dust was more familiar at ground level, the Ostrich swooped the biplane even lower. By riding upon its vibrations, Reed managed to swerve the crate away from the Ostrich's hand. But the bulkhead prevented his riding out of reach.

The Ostrich did not look around. His eyes glittered yellowishly. "Hold steady, old chap," his voice crashed and screeched above noise from the twin Gypsy-Major engines, "and I will diagnose the situation. I seem to recognize that dead volcano down there. My people call it the navel of the world."

The biplane was a de-Havilland 84 Dragon. The Ostrich's seat was jammed into an extreme nose. Behind him, Reed's crate of cans was crammed back against the plywood bulkhead.

Both passenger and pilot strained forward to peer out through the vee-shaped windshield. The plain of dust was spilling around under the monsoon. It was mottled with mixed-up herds and local warfare.

Arms outstretched, the Ostrich was leaning forward with an arrowhead of a smile on a face as lean as a sign-board. One hand reached forward to the wheel and the

other back to Reed's ribs. The biplane swooped and soared. The Ostrich clutched and manipulated. "Ow woaw," came from Reed.

Some camels had not broken the hobbles. With front legs bound together, they travelled slowly in a grotesque gallop directly away from the biplane. Since the biplane was rocketing along at dust level, the camels gyrated as though on parade. In smaller circles, the herders stepped around each other.

Theirs was a mutually inimical cotillion. Splintery arms gesticulated. The spears danced.

"You can stop worrying," roared the Ostrich. "Your spleen is not enlarged. That is, if you have got one." He laced disfigured fingers around Reed's wrist and looked out at a petrol gauge on a nacelle. Bumps in the monsoon kept the gauge jumping. "We have got to find it soon," he added.

"I feel jittery," whimpered Reed. "The pulse is more or less regular, Hector. But there is not much juice left."

Each celluloid window offered a yellowish view of an engine in a nacelle. Each engine was thrusting the biplane through the bumps with power of a hundred horses. On lower inner-wing sections, steel-tube mountings trembled with thunder from a thousand hooves.

The celluloid deflected coolness from the monsoon but transmitted heat from the sunrise on to the dinner suit. Reed sighed damp breaths down inside the dinner suit and pegged himself across behind the pilot's seat. He was breathing fifteen gallons of air each minute.

A good deal of water which had once been Hector Reed now hung around as vapour. With the side vectors shut, the nose of the biplane ripened. A pattern of condensation, like facets in a dragonfly's eye, settled inside the celluloid.

Feverishly, Reed surveyed the plain of dust which was smouldering under the sunrise. "It looks like an old movie of hell," he whined.

Now and then, the Ostrich perused a hinged map-board. Then he would look out toward a skyline which was tangled with contours of dunes. The dunes reddened as they receded. A glacier on Ol-Skoni gleamed gypsum white beyond the skyline. The mountain itself was sky coloured, a globe of venetian glass.

Pressures from the soaring and swooping were going into the Ostrich and coming out through hands and feet as adjustments to the wheel and rudder bars. "We have to slide in somewhere, don't you agree. But there is a bit of a crosswind, old bean."

Reed threw himself back against the bulkhead. He tucked in intestines with both hands and braced the desert boots high up behind the Ostrich's seat.

From the crate beneath him, Reed fished up a can of aerated mineral water. A label said it had been treated according to most scrupulous hygienic standards. It had been filtered through porcelain and centrifuged until every last skerrick of life had succumbed. Reed read the label and gazed afresh on to the plain of dust. In a world of unscrupulous sterility, skerricks of life down there were scuttling around vigorously.

By pressing a thumb heavily upon it, Reed increased pressure inside the can. The mineral water absorbed more of its own aeration. Thus, when he nipped a couple of holes in an end, where a manufacturer had printed dots, the water did not froth and spurt.

"The herders do not seem to realize that a camel could annihilate us," observed the Ostrich. Under pressure of the observation, Reed succeeded in swallowing once or twice but failed to fizz at all.

In fact, the can could have been pierced at any spot, at any end. But to reduce decision time for hestitant drinkers, the manufacturer had printed the dots whereupon to apply the spike. Similarly, a tee had been whitewashed upon the crater floor. A landing could be made almost anywhere, yet the tee was there in case hesitant pilots needed a hint.

The crater was blotched red with reflected sunrise. Laden with weaver-bird nests, a fringe of thorntrees sprouted just below the rim of the crater. Above the rim, aerials for a control tower were silhouetted in momentary filigree. Then the biplane was plunging toward the sandy floor.

An amber light was winking from the control tower. Runway numbers, charcoaled on tablecloths, were nailed up on candelabra trees near the winking amber.

The control tower was in fact Reed's tent. Beneath the camp stretcher was a loudspeaker and beneath the water-filter was a very-high-frequency transceiver. The tilley lamp, swinging in the monsoon, was reflecting amber fragments of the sunrise in a pattern of winking signals.

Scattered across Jamskoni, from the downlands of the grazing area to the uplands of Ol-Skoni mountain were the people's dwellings. The dwellings were thatched huts whose walls were mudded, dunged, and whitewashed with gypsum. They appeared to be scattered haphazardly like rock salt, but terraces here and there on the uplands had caught most of the scatter.

From the terraces, farmers and strings of wives could be seen moving down toward the open market in the crater. The wives were carrying produce and wares for sale in the market. Since the carrying was done exclusively on wifely skulls, down precipitous paths of the crater wall a graceful gait was an aid to survival.

Details around the sandy floor stood out as though painted in oils. The airstrip, bedded on murram, shone in patches through a rumpled carpet of sand. Beginning at the whitewashed tee, the airstrip led past the governmental workshop and stopped on the cement tarmac. The old colonial club, flanking the tarmac, was now a passenger hall.

The biplane lost height rapidly. From the fringe of thorntrees some weaver-birds shot out across the crater. A twin engine spluttered. Drops of blood thumped the windshield and blew into a film.

The film spread across the non-shattering glass and the sunrise projected it on to the Ostrich. Reed shouted: "You hit a weaver-bird with one of the props."

A shallow mask of flesh on the Ostrich's face stretched as a bony jaw sagged into a savage grin. The bloodshot eyes swivelled from one twin engine to the other. "Which one?" he croaked. "The one with the chipped beak," said Reed.

Around the open market, work cells were coated with plaster of paris. Under the sunrise, they glowed pink and faded purple with every shift of the biplane's course.

The work cells were governmental departments. It was apparent that there was an abundance of tribal policemen guarding the departments. The Ostrich pulled and stamped. The biplane banked and sideslipped. The work cells floated one way and then stampeded in reverse. Strawberry and khaki uniforms on the tribal policemen became streaks of colour flickering past the celluloid side windows.

The monsoon had moulded transversal ripples across the sandy floor of the crater. The sunrise laid on a zebra pattern of shadows. Within each shadow the dew crust endured, but elsewhere the sand particles were blowing

away. Only the shadows remained substantial and even they were becoming hollow.

The biplane drifted into a glide path. "Is it against your religion, old chap, to spike more than one can at a time?" "You can take the whole crate," howled Reed. "It is all the same to me."

The biplane's shadow scuttled down the crater wall and then came slithering across the sandy floor. Part of the shadow, cast by two landing wheels, came slithering in advance. Magnified by perspective, the part in advance looked like gigantic nippers reaching out to grasp the biplane.

The landing wheels were twelve feet apart. They groped toward the whitewashed tee. When a wheel touched, a torrent of whitewashed sand spurted up and abraded the fabric fuselage.

There was a noise as of an ocean dhow ploughing into a reef. The sand sprayed upward outside the biplane. Dust swirled inside. The air was instantly hotter. It carried a parched smell into Reed's nose and laid down a coating on the mucous membrane.

A stress of impact drove him down into the crate. The Ostrich rapped out: "Sit tight."

A spasm shot through Reed. Straightening his knees, he snapped a stanchion on the pilot's seat. Compelled by the desert boots, the seat crashed forward. The Ostrich's beak was clapped into the vee of the windshield.

A second landing wheel struck the airstrip. Reed sank deeper into the crate. "Stop panicking," he shouted, flailing with the desert boots. The Ostrich's beak thudded against non-shattering glass.

The wheel and column was driven up under the Ostrich's ribs. Anatomically he manipulated and aeronautically the biplane responded.

During a transition from touching down to slowing down, a situation in the biplane was sustained by the Ostrich's beak. When the biplane stopped rocketing and merely trundled, Reed said: "If you relaxed more you would not find flying so difficult." He withdrew the desert boots and the Ostrich retrieved a vee-shaped beak from the windshield. "It is not difficult," he grinned.

Hollow shadows in the airstrip shuttled up and down Reed's backbone. "What they do not teach you in flying school," he growled, "is consideration for passengers." He pulled his mouth down under his chin and spiked another can.

"Ostrich," he called after a time to the gaunt Minister who was drinking aerated water in front of him. "Could you please stop bumping us on the airstrip?" "We can stop immediately, old boy. Did not realize we were bumping." He opened the side vectors.

The Ostrich's grin opened wider. It became an air-scoop in the monsoon which came boiling in through the vectors beside the windshield. The open market was covered with display mats. The monsoon tugged at the mats and sprinkled sand upon them.

In the open market could be seen three of the Ostrich's wives. At least their clothing could be seen. They were wearing cassocks, wimples and gauze veils. A looseness in the cassocks betrayed a shapeliness in the wives, and a gracefulness in the wimples indicated a comeliness in their style of walking. Reed stared. "My word," he muttered.

Along a furrow, thousands of weaver-birds were being swept away with water. About twenty bearers were sweeping the water up on to the cement tarmac. The biplane reached an end of the airstrip and veered toward the tarmac.

Bundled twigs were flailing a wedge of water and

driving it in a slow wave up a sloping surface. Mrs Buccleuch was complaining that the wave was soiling her brogues. Children were chuckling as they bathed. Heated by the cement, the water was warmer than blood. The bearers were beating it up to where it could cleanse the whole tarmac. Breaking the bearers' line meant rupturing a living dyke.

As the biplane rolled toward him, an elderly bearer with hare teeth looked up and scowled. "Sometimes we have to drive over rather rough people," said Reed as the biplane rolled and pitched on cement which had warped under too many monsoons.

Smooth tyres on the landing wheels slithered on the wet cement. There was a loss of tyre adhesion and the biplane slid into a stemturn. The water was not having time enough to escape from contact with the tyres. The biplane was floating.

When the slow wave was broken, the flailing stopped and the water began flooding back into the market. The biplane floated further on to the cement. "The trick in dealing with bearers is in making jokes," explained Reed. "They do not have to be good jokes."

The biplane slowed as the water sluiced away at an accelerating rate. There were no brakes on the biplane, but the side vectors functioned like flaps. "It keeps them in a good mood," added Reed while the bearers scowled at the undone sweeping. Around widening puddles in the market were circumferences of froth.

"Even if you just point out," cried Reed, "that one chap has teeth like a hare. That is good enough." He shouted a translation in vernacular.

The bearers howled with laughter except for the elderly one. More they howled, more water was lost to the cement. The biplane skewed to a halt.

Around the open market, the farmers' wives were setting up displays of produce and wares. Above them, a few kites rode the monsoon where it flicked up from rusty iron roofs. The Ostrich's wives were undulating out of sight along an alley into a commercial sector. Reed stumbled back through the biplane. He opened a side hatch in the canvas fuselage and continued to stare after the wives.

Colonial-style chairs had been arranged along the tiled terrace of the passenger hall. In front of the chairs were low tables whose surfaces were curved in order to leave no marks on colonial-style legs.

The chairs contained mattresses stuffed with dried grass. Leather buttons were sewn through the mattresses to prevent creeping in the grass. A tame cheetah padded about selecting a mattress and chirping like a weaver-bird.

Some bearers in long green smocks and red waist-coats were slipping about with trays laden with steaming tea helping to warm up blasts of the sunrise. So far there were no passengers to drink the tea in cups still wet from washing up.

Since a surplus of colonial officers had once inhabited the club, a surplus of trained bearers now inhabited the passenger hall.

The Ostrich still sat up in the pilot's seat. He was bit-ing lips between hand-filed teeth and drumming finger-nails on the aerated can. Through one side window he could see Reed staring at his three wives. Through the other side window he could see the Superintendent of Police enthroned atop the whitewashed steps.

"Well, I am no longer involved," said Reed leaping down from the canvas fuselage. As Reed leaped out of the side hatch, the biplane's tail rose and floated like a

paper kite in the monsoon. In the nose, the Ostrich leaned back on the leather seat and the tail settled.

Hector Reed leaped down to where a mound of ribs gave him a series of shocks. The desert boots rode up and down over whitened bones and tore into canvas remnants of skin. An elephant might have caused an accident, dying just there.

Luckily, the elephant had half shrunk into the sand after turning on its back and drawing in its legs. As he stepped on to the cement tarmac, Reed muttered about scandalous conditions upcountry. Elephants were expiring on airstrips and Ministers were monopolizing wives.

The Ostrich poked at the wheel and column and an aileron flapped. Along the wings, wire-drag bracings trembled. Having recently descended from the grazing area, the biplane was cooler than the crater. Dew had condensed along the wings, and the monsoon pushed the dew to the trailing edges.

By poking the wheel, the Ostrich shook the dew off the wings. Carried by the monsoon, fragments of the dew bespattered Reed who sprang off the elephant crying: "Clumsy nincompoop." Through the side vector, the Ostrich called: "Were you looking for the shower-room?"

In the open market, raiment was being worn against a hot spell to come. Like butterflies around a soak, a multitude clustered around Hector Reed.

The multitude was flavoured strongly of munched peanuts and boiled manioc. There was an interchange of information about aviation and a fretting of sandalled feet. While the dew on Reed was draining into the desert boots, the multitude pressed in closer. In the hot spell it was miraculous to find a dripping entity.

Some females in the multitude had skulls smooth shaven to indicate that they were unmarried. But those with babies had left tufts of hair unshaven to indicate that they were no longer unmarried.

The babies were slung on the females' backs. There were flimsy cotton shawls from the lowlands and coloured blankets from the uplands. The females held out the blankets to catch the monsoon and funnel it into the babies. They followed in Reed's footsteps as though tracing a source.

The males in the market were deserting the display mats and joining the multitude. Sandalmakers stopped excising soles out of carcasses of tractor tyres. A brewer popped a wickerwork strainer back into a half calabash of beer. Snuff sellers stopped pounding tobacco leaves into dust for the monsoon. And sculptors stopped sculpting face masks out of corkbark.

From atop the whitewashed steps of the passenger hall, the Superintendent rustled out some vernacular and the tribal policemen tried to disperse the multitude. The policemen pushed with shotguns but the multitude flowed around them to get a better look at Reed. It was like spreading oily butter with matchsticks.

Across the murram, the desert boots picked up gravel. On the cement tarmac they left gravelly prints. On the whitewashed steps Reed crunched and grated. The bearers grumbled and rubbed with mops.

Since the dinner suit was impregnated with grease, the dew did not soak in as far as Hector Reed. The cement tarmac was drying but suction kept clutching at the desert boots. The boots had no laces. Reed had to walk in a special way.

Reed's face was drawn as he peered ahead and trudged with a suctioned gait. Mrs Buccleuch was standing on

the steps. In the sunrise her nails looked like shredded wheat. Her legs burgeoned with red veins and her bosom wilted navelwards. A red zipper on a crimson frock stretched from armpit to hem. A beret strapped to a shoulder was inscribed: Air Hostess.

Of crimson nylon, Mrs Buccleuch's frock reflected a narrow spectrum of the sunrise. Hector Reed shaded his eyes. It was like regarding a sodium flare.

Attached to the boots, a stench of expired elephant gave Reed an impressive air. The chilled dew had shocked him. As he advanced, Mrs Buccleuch drew back. She said: "Oh, Heckie. They ought to install toilets in the aircraft." The dew kept pouring out of folds in the dinner suit. The multitude milled forward against the tribal policemen.

Hector Reed trudged up the steps. "Jamskoni airlines," he cried. "Who's for the next fling on the razzle-dazzle?" Then Mrs Buccleuch said: "Flying conditions are perfect this morning."

Reed rubbed his behind where the crate of cans had embossed medals of bravery. "The conditions are extraordinary," he cried. Mrs Buccleuch stumbled backward over the Superintendent.

Normally it would have been a minor accident. But just now too many people were watching. Mrs Buccleuch collapsed across an arm rest and a loll chair pitched forward like a seesaw. The Superintendent went down the steps on to the desert boots. The multitude shouted. The tribal policemen were grinning.

Instead of taking Mrs Buccleuch's proffered hand in regaining his feet, the Superintendent pinched his nostrils between thumb and forefinger. "I am a religious man, madam," his voice was a high-pitched rustling of vernacular, "and you will understand that I must not

touch the flesh of a menstruating woman." The people in the multitude were slapping at the tribal policemen and yelling with laughter. The tribal policemen began explaining what had happened. Reed stepped quickly through into the passenger hall.

The passenger hall was a contrived boudoir. Walls were tinted in two shades of creme de cacao and furniture came direct from a psychiatric consultation. Even though she spent hours as the Air Hostess in titivating and maquillaging, Mrs Buccleuch often wondered aloud if the original club ambiente would not have been better preserved.

No passengers were in the passenger hall but a farmer with a live kid was walking toward a kitchen entrance. Two shopkeepers were playing basra with worn-out cards. A koranic schoolmaster had just called in for a glass of tea.

Poetry from a cabinet wireless was jamming the hall with politics. It was the same poetry as listened to by the herders on the grazing area.

Over near a bric-à-brac shop a loudspeaker was shouting Reed's name. The two shopkeepers were breakfasting on smoked tea, very sweet, and small sponge cakes whose flour content was rice. Small squeaks occurred during mastication of such cakes. As Reed squished in, staring into murky recesses of the hall, he seemed to be tramping the squeaks out of hot loose sand.

When Reed asked for the shower-room, the koranic teacher knocked over the glass of tea. He displayed some gold teeth, concealed some toes in pink slippers, and hurried outside to the tarmac where a shiny blackboard was set up in front of some squeaky pupils.

Between the passenger hall and the shower-room, there were several edifices. Reed was supposed to traverse

mud huts, aluminium rondavels, and assorted passages. As he moved more swiftly he made more errors.

He started running the edifices calling for help. Several bearers in smocks and waistcoats appeared intermittently, rustling directions in vernacular. Sweaty and straggly haired, he plunged into one or two wrong toilets. Twice he found himself back at the bric-à-brac shop whose loudspeaker continued to mention Reed's name.

Eventually confined within a cubicle in the shower-room, Reed was lathering embossments off the behind with airport soap and sweetwater, when the Ostrich's voice reached him: "The Chief is sort of calling for you, old man." "Right ho, Ostrich." "I overheard what you said to Mrs Buccleuch, Hector." "Ho." "Do you mind?"

Reed's skull was ripped where it had been knocking against the bulkhead. The airport soap was stinging the behind. Aerodynamically induced, a plastic curtain was wafting into the cubicle and giving a clammy caress.

"It might be politic. You know what I mean, old bean. To give the impression that a flight with Jamskoni airlines is not all that humdrum. Passengers want to think they will be having an adventure, what?" Reed tore at the plastic curtain. He shouted: "Right," and snapped the curtain shut again. The pilot's boots could then be heard padding away from the shower-room.

Drops of water which had been clinging to Reed, sprayed out of the cubicle. A puddle formed beneath the curtain. Since it functioned as a mirror, the puddle permitted Reed to observe the hare-toothed bearer who made off with the dinner suit, and the desert boots.

Reed dried off by tucking paper napkins between his toes. The Ostrich could be heard on the veranda talking to Mrs Buccleuch. The shower-room was partitioned in

aluminium. Due to acoustic hocus-pocus in the aluminium, voices on the veranda were transmitted with fidelity. "You seem to have got rid of the Superintendent," said the Ostrich.

"I didn't get rid of him," Mrs Buccleuch's voice was shrill. "It is always Reed who causes all the embarrassment around here. He deliberately tries to blanket my efforts. Suppresses my work."

Haretooth came into the shower-room with fresh clothing. Reed hissed at him: "Much slow. You meat. Me knife." Haretooth gave no indication of having heard.

"Did he ask permission before setting up headquarters on the veranda?" Hector Reed listened to the Ostrich's croak while scrubbing handfuls of toilet paper across sopping skin. Mrs Buccleuch said: "Reed has a sort of stultifying effect. Or sort of messing me up. Tangling me up." She sighed. "I understand," in English the Ostrich was more sonorous. "It was the Superintendent I was wondering about." The vernacular required a rustling pronunciation.

A main motive for going on safari was in a freshening-up sensation afterwards. Reed glowed with friction from the toilet paper. He stepped into ankle socks knitted from fluffy white string. The fluffy white absorbed remnant fatigue. The desert boots had been brushed inside and out. They were cool and light.

"As you are probably aware, Mrs Buccleuch. The situation in Jamskoni is rather ticklish. By the way, I mentioned your problem to Mr Reed." Mrs Buccleuch cut in loudly: "If he is allowed to use the passenger hall, why hasn't Reed got a key? And he ought not arrive without consulting me. You know how difficult bearers are to control. And last night I had this kind of contretemps

with Reed. In any case, what is his job here? And you what's the uh uh. . . ." She was silent for a few seconds.

"Why does he have to wear a dinner suit before breakfast? And by the way, what is his job here? You could not speak to him about the state of those boots?" Intermittently, the Ostrich croaked, but not always on cue. The bloodshot eyes were surveying the market where the tribal policemen still wandered about.

Freshly ironed, a safarishirt rustled as Reed put it on. A pair of Bombay bloomers had creases which jabbed at his knees. "We are all trying to struggle on in unrealistic roles," came the Ostrich's croak. "Did it look to you like an attempt to take over the airport?"

"That was the first real trouble last night I can pinpoint. First real evidence. Something to go on," again Mrs Buccleuch fell silent. Reed selected a used razorblade from a washbasin. Clasping it between two slivers of soap, he shaved himself. To reduce friction, he kept wetting the slivers. As a consequence, he was lathered more thickly after shaving than before. He snapped an acacia twig from a tree beyond a windowsill and chewed it.

"I was ready to say exactly what I felt. Give Reed a piece of my mind. No beating about the bush or make believe. But I was not angry. Although he had brought all those policemen along. I wanted to tell him no. That there was no chance. . . " "Do you think the policemen were trying to take over the whole market?"

Reed chewed the twig into a brush. He added paste from a dinky tube and scrubbed his teeth. "One of the bearers is an old headman," said Mrs Buccleuch, "and we understand each other. And then Reed came and caused a disturbance and molested and uh. The bearers were visibly wondering." In the shower-room Reed was

spitting the paste into a washbasin. Holding his mouth open as wide as possible, he pumped his lungs and circulated air around an inflamed tongue.

Hector Reed dried saliva above his upper teeth. Then when he pushed it, his upper lip remained suctioned producing a face with protruding teeth. "The Superintendent would make a super president," he cried in a false voice upon staggering out on to the veranda.

Toasted by the sunlight and licked by the monsoon, the cement tarmac had dried out. The sandals on the multitude were raising a dust which made the babies rub their eyes.

Along the glazed tiles of the veranda, tables had been set up with white cloths. When Reed sat down, a loll chair cricklecrackled and several mosquitoes beneath the chair fell upon his ankles. After two minutes he began scratching the ankles.

Haretooth was drumming fingers on a wickerwork tray in rhythm with the wireless poetry. Reed perused a menu that had been hand-written several fly-specked months earlier. He had to decide between smoked monkey and biltong. By way of appetizer, Haretooth described a special dish of living brain and hot honey. In the old days, gangsters had invented the dish, converting skulls of living prisoners into bowls.

After decapping some mineral water, Haretooth used the bottlecap as paperweight on a chit. Reed picked up the chit and flicked the Chit away toward a vendor of hemp cigarettes. Mrs Buccleuch said: "What sort of background do you have for your work, Heckie?" "I was a teen-age Mau Mau," replied Reed.

Hare tooth sliced a loaf, replacing slices so that the loaf was reassembled. A wholesome smell escaped from the slices. "We bake the bread on the premises," said Mrs

Buccleuch softly. Reed said: "Best thing to bake it on." The Ostrich was wandering away.

The bread was delicious hunks of vortrekker alongside an unglazed bowl of coffee. A coffee carafe simmered nearby on a porcelain brazier. Haretooth dropped a coal from the brazier into the bowl and all grounds submerged. The coffee took on a mulled taste. "Tell me, if you were married, Heckie, and your wife wore her old diamonds, would you be jealous?"

With the bottlecap under a bare foot, the vendor shuffled forward. A scraping on the tiles made Reed look up. She had hemp cigarettes, hand-rolled in a paperbag, balanced on a shaven skull. On her back a baby wailed. While discussing a price with Reed, she shook herself gently. The wailing ceased.

Some of the cigarettes were so old they had developed yellow blotches. A cannabis odour mixed with the coffee.

The Ostrich was among the multitude. The smile could be seen here and there above the display mats. The overalls were elegant but inside was a body to make any multitude attend. Beaten-up hands, filed teeth, scarred tattoo under an eye, and a reddish black covering of dust save where goggles had been.

A silhouette left by the goggles gave the Ostrich a stunned expression. The reddish black had fused into a lacquer under the sunrise. The lacquer lay cracked into ravines whose edges were crumbling skin. Blood trickled from a crushed nostril.

Reed pushed a coin with a hole in it at the vendor. She threaded the coin on a necklace. The baby seized the necklace and began to strangle the vendor.

Hector Reed turned a glass tumbler over a winged termite. Dust fell out of the glass, dribbled to the tiles and vanished in the monsoon. Haretooth was serving

strips of mutton which had been dried in sunlight, fried in ghee, seasoned with cloves and cinnamon, and kept for years. On a side plate were mounds of midges, harvested from a desert waterhole. They had been scooped up in millions, pressed into cakes and sold to Jamskoni airlines.

Reed seized a small tube whose inscription guaranteed that contents had never been touched by human hand. He added paste to the strips of mutton. He incised neatly. He chewed a fragment of the strips and frothed at the mouth. He read the inscription again. "Toothpaste," he muttered. "I thought that twig tasted strong in the shower-room."

Mrs Buccleuch had taken a loll chair opposite Reed. "You know the Minister of Aviation," she said. With the monsoon going past at fifteen knots, the crater was agitated. Curtains of sand spurted up after bouncing off basalt ledges. Through the curtains, the sunlight was dull red. "Never heard of him," growled Reed.

The sand, falling along the veranda, had a dusty taste. Every surface became pastel. "He is rather keen on me," lipstick on Mrs Buccleuch appeared to be composed of brickdust. "He must be abnormal," said Reed.

"Are you like that?" "I certainly am." "Are all men like that?" "Just the two of us," said Reed.

A brewery had been set up in the open market. It had no walls but grass thatching was supported by mangrove poles. A brewer was polishing at gourds so that they shone in the sunlight, and two or three monkeys were gleaning centipedes up in the thatching.

As the sunlight fell more steeply, the multitude put on more raiment. Colours in the raiment swirled beyond the mangrove poles. Matutinal prayers and weaver-birds spiralled above a mosque.

Hector Reed drew at a cigarette while the vendor touched a charcoal to it. He inhaled a measure of universal insight. He contemplated.

In the hedge along the veranda, hibiscus petals were uncrumpling. High overhead was a rippled pattern of cirrus. No doubt each night-time brought a blemish to the mind but then each sunrise combed out the crannies up in the thatch.

"Mother," said Reed, "a remarkable blend." "My son," said the vendor, "you do not lie." A ready-rubbed core for the cigarette was black mash of wildleaf, tinder dry and rolled round the hemp. Perspiration gleamed on taut skin across Reed's face.

The bush vehicle lay where it had been hurled last night. Sump oil was bleeding on to the cement tarmac. The sunrise had dried out a petrol pump.

Reed forced petrol through the pump by blowing into a tank. He drove the vehicle out from the market and rushed at the crater wall. The pump rattled as it sucked at the tilted tank.

Reed climbed the crater wall by double declutching through eight gears. He parked on the rim and unscrewed a radiator cap. Steam escaped, condensed and formed a drip. A wasp came out of the tent and attacked the drip.

From a toolkit he extracted a roll of red tape. There was no path in the rainforest. The desert boots stumbled. Some roots were half way up tree trunks in a maze of Gothic buttresses. Reed stepped perpetually over crenellated parapets.

Glistening like an elastic icicle, the python opened jaws on expandable hinges. Reed hissed and stumbled away. The python was coiled around a score of eggs which were incubating in leaf mould. The coils seemed to have been recently waxed and polished.

Carrying the red tape, Reed scrambled over the rim on to the wall of the crater. Because the sunlight was falling heavily, he scrambled slowly. "In the lethal rays of a crater sun," so he told himself, "the less you hurry the longer you live."

At times Reed scrambled so unhurriedly that he hardly seemed to be living at all. He had to stretch the tape from thorntree to thorntree under the crater rim. Ordinarily, the tape was pasted on vehicles to reflect headlamps at night. But between the thorntrees it reflected the sunlight in thin flames.

For each thorntree a branch had to be selected whereon to stick the tape. Reed spent long minutes selecting. He leaned on the branches and gazed toward a cool silence in the rainforest above the rim. Sometimes he listened to a hot babble in the open market on the sandy floor.

It was a season when chlorophyll was attenuating and the thorntrees were yellowing. On distant uplands, meadows could be seen where peanuts and hay were stooked. There was no floating dust to heat the air. An occasional bubble of chill air was reminiscent of autumn. From Ol-Skoni's snowcap, thin air spilled over the rainforest and sank in cold bubbles down the crater wall. The bubbles invigorated him and moved Reed from branch to branch. Between the bubbles he sunbaked.

He used the safarishirt to wipe away sweat, blood, and bird dung which exuded from pores, thorn pricks, and weaver-bird nests. The nests were arranged so thickly in clusters that often they hid the thorns. Even though they put many thorns out of sight, the clusters never really put them out of touch. The thorns probed and soon a tail of the safarishirt reflected the sunlight in red blotches.

As Reed moved from thorntree to thorntree there was

an occasional sizzling of pastureflies. Usually the sizzling denoted a corpse left over from a nocturnal carnage. On one occasion however it was the python's skin.

For about an hour, the python had abandoned the eggs in the leaf mould and crawled on to the crater wall. The sunrise had cracked it and the python had shucked the skin. Then, warmed by the sunlight, the python had inched back into the rainforest.

Since Reed had reached an end of the tape without reaching an end of the thorntrees, the skin could not have sizzled at a better time. He lengthened the tape by sticking it to the skin. He tied the skin to a final thorntree.

Hector Reed trampled through tamarisks and was inside the tent. The wasp was fabricating a mud faggot from the drip under the bush vehicle. Soon it was attaching the mud to a loudspeaker under the camp stretcher.

Some months earlier, when the crater was an administrative centre for Jamskoni district, Hector Reed had lived in a stone bungalow. He had drawn a small salary for doing next to nothing. And he had cultivated an authoritative bark.

Nowadays that Jamskoni was a republic, Reed was drawing a lot more for doing a little less. The bark had deteriorated into an advisory whine. And because the bungalow had been commandeered by the Superintendent, Reed had to live in the tent.

Under the camp stretcher, the loudspeaker crackled and Reed whined advice into a microphone: "Jamskoni tower to Charlie Foxtrot. Readability four. You are cleared for a straight-in VFR. Over." "Roger," came through the loudspeaker from an inbound aircraft.

Down in the open market the Ostrich was dragging

the tail of the biplane around the tarmac. He caught a wing in the brewery and the multitude milled about. The brewer pointed at bruises in the thatching.

As he climbed up into the box fuselage, a pair of goggles fell off the Ostrich. The brewer kicked the goggles into the side hatch after him. Reed triggered the microphone: "Birdbroom. Are you reading?" "All clear, old bean," the loudspeaker transmitted a croak from the Ostrich. "Charlie Foxtrot on initial approach, Ostrich." "Right you are, Hector."

The multitude swirled as the biplane beetled away along the airstrip. Within the crater, heated air was rising and beating back the monsoon. The biplane's tail floated too high. Even though the landing wheels hardly touched, thousands of weaver-birds stepped aside from sandbaths.

Behind the tent, Jamskoni was pinched up into a corner called Ol-Skoni mountain. Having accumulated on the pinched-up corner, snow was packing down into a glacier.

"Tower to birdbroom," Reed sniffed at chilled air which was rolling over the tent from the glacier. "Visibility perfect. But down currents at ground level if you can climb that high." "Can do."

Along both borders of the airstrip, aloes stood up like bayonets. The landing wheels were smooth. The Ostrich craned forward behind the vee-shaped windshield.

Transporting mud in a hexagonal grip, the wasp swung around Reed's microphone. It wheeled and butted against a shiny side of the transceiver. It buzzed.

Where the glacier terminated on Ol-Skoni, a scree slope started. The sunlight was warming the scree and the scree was melting the glacier. Drips from the glacier soaked down the slope.

At night they would freeze and split the scree into finer shards. Of a noon, however, the drips trickled out on to upland turf. Several kob antelopes were at the trickle. Hoofs clicked on the scree.

The camp stretcher was loaded with delayed-action nits. Even though the nits attacked all night, it was only all day that Reed scratched.

Reed said: "Jamskoni to Charlie Foxtrot. Are you reading? Over." While the wasp passed by, Reed sounded terse. "Give me the Whisky Extra," shouted the loudspeaker. Reed chanted: "Quebec November Hotel one zero zero one millibars. Runway three four. . ." "I say, Hector," a croak from the Ostrich came through the loudspeaker. "Conversation is so difficult if you just speak normally." "I shall worry about normality," snapped Reed. "What is normality?" asked Charlie Foxtrot. "Have I got your message?" rapped out Reed. "Let's bash on," croaked the Ostrich.

The chilled air, falling down the glacier, was being tainted by the kobs before flowing out over the upland turf and into the rainforest. Touched by the taint, the python had emerged. The coils were arranged like a lasso so that here and there a whitish belly was exposed. The triangular head regarded the kobs and the coils arranged themselves.

Looking rather like a frozen trickle, the python glided through the upland turf. Having recently moulted, the hide reflected the sunlight with a feeble blue sheen.

Coming off the glacier, the sunlight was illuminating the kobs before penetrating vertical slits in the python's eyes. Unable to blink, the eyes stared.

Beneath the camp stretcher in the tent, the loudspeaker crackled with static electricity. Reed wiped at a perspiring chin with a bloody shirt tail. The passenger hall was

airconditioned but up in the control tower there was only an occasional whiff of glaciated air.

Steadily, the python trickled uphill. A large tongue flicked out in front, picking up particles and wiping them behind a top lip. The python was navigating by taste.

The kobs stopped clicking hoofs and raised heads toward Ol-Skoni. Noiselessly and odourlessly, a herder had appeared on the scree slope. The herder raised an arm and hoofs vibrated. The kobs shot away across the turf.

The Ostrich was transforming the biplane into a sheepdog and herding the weaver-birds away from the airstrip. At times he landed, taxied over the sandy floor, put up flocks, and took off after them.

The Ostrich's croak was basically public school with an overcoating of laryngitis. Reinforced with a roar from the twin engines, it erupted now and then from the loudspeaker. When the biplane misbehaved, the croak rustled into vernacular.

Since its passenger cabin was empty, the biplane had a poor attitude. The tail kept rising on heated air from the sand floor. In the nose, the Ostrich kept throwing his bony body back against the leather seat.

Upon the scree slope, the herder regarded neither the kobs nor the python. Before him, the turf declined into the rainforest which lined the crater rim. The tent was on the rim.

Because its brisket had been seized in the python's jaws, one of the kobs was not vibrating across the turf. Stabbing hoofs into the turf, the kob threw the python about. A distinctive smell emanated from the kob and the other kobs accelerated.

Reed's microphone was slippery. The camp stretcher had become redolent of sweltering nits. Fumes of heat

were rising from the crater past the rim. Somewhere aloft behind cumulus cloud, the inbound aircraft was making final approach. The Ostrich had not yet swept the airstrip.

The herder's arm was horizontal. He was a signpost. Behind him on the glacier a caravan turned aside away from the tent.

Tossed up into loops, the python fell back into knots. Inside the knots, the kob was breathing with difficulty. Snugness assisted expiration and scaly friction impeded inspiration.

Because air therein was thicker than elsewhere, the ministry of aviation had laid the airstrip in the crater. The ministry's aircraft was supposed to use the airstrip to become airborne. Once airborne, it was supposed to corkscrew around the crater, sweeping away the flocks of weaver-birds.

Of an afternoon the thick air rose like smoke and the biplane was inclined to rise with it. In the tent, Reed's neck became a corkscrew. "Hard to starboard, Ostrich," he kept sniffing into the microphone.

Now and then a flock of weaver-birds would shoot up the dry watercourse past Reed's tent and disperse over the upland turf. From atop the scree slope the herder could not see into the crater. But he could see the flocks come over the rim. And he could see Reed's neck.

The biplane climbed within the crater and the neck gave an extra twist. The herder's arm became vertical and the caravan transformed itself.

Its own struggles killed the kob. The struggles increased a need for air. By quaking and heaving the kob allowed the python greater opportunity to tighten the knots. No bones were broken.

The python's jaws were four loosely-connected halves.

They nipped on to the kob's snout. In turn, each half advanced an inch or so. The kob appeared to be pulling on a plastic sweater.

A flexible mouth enlarged incredibly and, lubricated with saliva, the kob plunged. After swallowing head and horns of the kob, the python rested.

The dry watercourse formed a kind of spout for the volcanic crater which was bowl shaped. Preceding the biplane out through the spout a torrent of weaver-birds now poured past the tent. Red beaks zipped like sparks in a bushfire.

A breeding season was terminating and thousands of males still wore black masks and bright plumage. By comparison, females were dull and sparrow-like.

No twittering could be heard but a thrumming could be felt. A feathery smell invaded the tent along with discarded fluff and dislodged lice. There were cracked grains of jowari and particles from sandbaths. The frayed canvas on the tent billowed and fluttered.

As the torrent thickened the tent became hotter. The sunlight became dimmer. The twin engines thundered in crescendo as the biplane climbed the spout behind the weaver-birds, failed to clear the rim, and sideslipped away back into the crater.

The four halves of the python's jaws were now widely separated. A windpipe was extruded so that breathing was possible beyond a throat whose capacity seemed already overloaded.

"Landing clearance? Over," crackled from the loudspeaker under the camp stretcher. "What is so hard about landing?" replied Reed. "Just aim for the whitewashed tee and switch off when the wheels touch." Since the weaver-birds were wrapped around it like a blanket, the tent was deprived of light and ventilation. Hector

Reed choked and coughed while the inbound aircraft asked for a repeat.

The caravan on the glacier had been a line of slowly-moving camels. As the biplane struggled to surmount the rim, the camels stopped being slow and started being motionless.

They were made to kneel into shapes not unlike half-embedded boulders. Then, diverting attention from the boulders, the herder glissaded down the scree. The biplane came over the rim and swerved toward the herder.

Most of the weaver-birds had sprayed out over the upland turf or over the grazing area. Some had spilled back into the crater. A few lay lifeless on the camp stretcher and others limped around the tent.

The heated air from the crater was an ascending column whose summit was now an anvil of cumulus cloud. The inbound aircraft, Charlie Foxtrot, shot out of the anvil and hurtled toward the airstrip. In the open market, the multitude had been scattered in a random pattern, rather like safari ants scouring for sustenance. As the inbound aircraft touched, bumped, ricocheted toward them, the multitude assembled in a pattern of hollow squares, rather like a chess board. The farmers and their wives squatted around edges of the display mats.

In Reed's tent, the loudspeaker transmitted the Ostrich's croak: "The red tape is a success, old bean." "Conspicuous?" "Almost impossible to overlook," while the biplane tottered and wavered.

In surmounting the rim, the biplane had transferred from the heated air to the chilled air. Like a dumped thunderstorm it dodged and rocked around the rainforest. Slipstreams from the two propellers prevented Reed's looking at the biplane.

Under the glissading herder, the scree cascaded like surf on a beach. It was composed of small rock fragments. No dust blew off but oceans of scree welled out on to the upland turf.

When the biplane wheeled toward the glacier, the python hissed, lunged, and regurgitated as though beating off a vulture. Soaked in saliva, the kob reversed the plunge.

The herder slipped off the slope and ran into a walk. The python skidded away slowly. An enormously-distended stomach made skidding difficult. The herder smiled up at the biplane. He inserted a spearblade between the python's jaws and sliced away its skull. The python twisted about for a while, but the kob held it anchored.

Huddled on the camp stretcher, Hector Reed yapped out instructions to the inbound aircraft which was rushing along the murram airstrip toward the open market. "You are cleared to taxi to tarmac," said Reed while vendors crowded in front of the aircraft.

White faces of passengers were visible in portholes of the aircraft. Up on the rim in the minaret-like tent, Reed was a muezzin appealing in ritual phrases on the passengers' behalf for celestial intervention. "Runway clear, Ostrich. Better bash down and hand out seasick pills." "Right you are, Hector."

Turbulence from the weaver-birds had now dispersed. In the sunlight around the tent, candelabra trees had assumed manlike postures. A cucumber vine groped around the candelabra trees, grappling at small shadows. Through the chilled air, the sunlight was falling like clubs. The herder had come in among the candelabra trees. His posture was not unlike theirs.

The loudspeaker crackled and banged. Jamskoni ver-

nacular was rustling through it together with noise from the twin engines. The Ostrich was seeking a buoyant parcel of air wherein to float back over the rainforest into the crater. An ibis in the rotting vegetation kept shouting: "Haa haa haa."

As the Ostrich's vernacular erupted from the loudspeaker in the tent, the herder stepped forward. There was a climax of thunder when the biplane managed to slip across the rim and corkscrew toward the airstrip. The tent went through a spasm as the slipstream caught it. The tilley lamp broke through the cardboard candelabra and crashed on to the herder's ankle.

"Take your time on a base turn," rapped out Reed to the microphone. "That is a good tip," crackled the loudspeaker as the spearblade preceded the herder between the open tent flaps. Shadow under the frayed canvas was suddenly darker and Reed's heart accelerated to over two beats per second. His hair moved.

An upcurrent of the heated air capsized the biplane and an explosion of lopsided vernacular came from the loudspeaker under the camp stretcher. Between the tent flaps, the herder crouched. A wiry body began a series of shakes.

Reed's head came up. A further lump of vernacular emerged from beneath him and the shakes became amplified. The spearblade jerked and stabbed.

The herder was wearing the python as a bundle of hoops. In rhythm with the shakes, the python twitched and flapped. Drops of blood flicked around the tent. Waves of stress flowed through the python and broke on the ingested kob. The distended stomach thumped the herder's back.

The herder had a scorched face and frozen sandals. He kept rubbing toes behind his knees. He chewed an icicle

and grunted with each breath. Dilated nostrils rumpled and strummed. Apart from the spear and the python, he carried a round shield and a skirt. A clay helmet and the sandals seemed part of a uniform. Reed dropped the microphone.

The loudspeaker continued to dispense phrases wrenched from the Ostrich during a dicy landing. After all, the airstrip was little better than a camel pad.

Muttering "muga mono" as he receded, Hector Reed slid along the camp stretcher. In a way that raffia was teased out before being woven, the herder's muscle structure shook out into sinews and fibres. Clicks came from his jaws. A reek of enlivened sweat curled into the tent.

It was known that a glance at the shakes was an invitation to be skewered. Submerged in shadow, Reed huddled deep within the tent. He had heard a good deal about the shakes. They were symptomatic of a high-protein diet. They came from too much loneliness. They denoted a habit of surviving on courage instead of on calories. There was even a theory about drinking camel blood and suffering from terminal constipation. Reed tugged at a steel tentpeg.

The tentpeg was long. To pin down a canvas wall it had been driven into soft earth during short rains. During a long dry spell the earth had hardened and tightened. Reed clutched at the tentpeg and the earth clutched back. The tentpeg did not budge.

Reed sweated and tugged. When a croak exploded from the loudspeaker: "Are there any obstructions ahead? We need a long run out," the herder jumped and snorted. The python threw the coils about. The tentpeg tore out of the earth.

The biplane was between the aloe borders, scuttling along the airstrip with a plume of sand smoking out

behind. The landing wheels touched but the tail floated. Taxi-ing speed was dangerously fast. In the open market, the vendors were milling around the tarmac.

As the tentpeg tore out, the sunlight flashed in under the canvas wall. The herder shouted and danced forward. Reed did not look. He went headfirst into the stormtrench. The loudspeaker crackled on: "Is there enough space up ahead, Hector? Do you advise a take-off?"

The herder performed like an overladen donkey climbing a sand dune. Shoulder bones stood out in relief. A wiry neck rocked to and fro and steam evaporated off the herder. Grunts and snorts assumed a rhythm. A thump coursed through the tent with every spasm.

Supine in the stormtrench, Reed wrestled the tentpeg. It had hooked into a fly on the Bombay bloomers.

The monsoon had petered out. There was ventilation neither in the trench nor in the tent. It was an interim of tangabili when every encounter developed into an argument. When every gesture incited a fight.

The trench had been dug around the tent so that dumped rainstorms could get away quickly. Because of the tentpeg, Reed was unable to drain away at all. A tearing of fabric came from the bloomers. With a run of pops, buttons rattled away on divergent trajectories. Bent into a right angle, Reed had his head in the trench and the desert boots still inside the tent. Since other tentpegs clinched the canvas, Reed went through an abrasive caress from a sandy hem.

Some parts of Reed crawled along the trench. Other parts clung to the tentpeg. Due to displacement of clothing, he appeared to be elongating. "Pull yourself together, Hector. It is no good relying on brakes," from the loudspeaker.

After encircling the tent, the trench cut toward the rim where the tamarisk trees excreted drips of salt at night. Nibbling on salty excretions, Reed contorted himself into two right angles in three dimensions. One angle on entering the trench and another in cutting toward the rim. "Are you reading me? You don't seem to appreciate the situation. Try to get this lot straightened out."

When the fly tore off, Reed shot over the rim and down the dry watercourse. Once in dead ground beyond the tamarisks, he galloped across the basalt ledges.

Due to statistical freakishness, the ledges were always just broad enough to wear Reed lopsidedly. He was a crab scuttling down temple steps.

An offside desert boot accrued excess fatigue. An on-side boot became merely jaded. With tall ears balanced vertically, a hare came past at a canter.

Within the tent, the herder continued to respond to crackles from the loudspeaker. The biplane continued to hurtle along the airstrip. Across the open market the multitude splashed away on both sides. The thatching on the brewery was masticated by a wingtip.

Since the ministry of aviation was sited down there, the Ostrich might have had an appointment down an alley in the commercial sector. In any case, he failed to park on the cement tarmac. A cloud of sand was all that remained of the biplane's passage across the market. A few farmers hurtling out of the alley indicated where the biplane had gone.

On the tiled veranda of the passenger hall, Mrs Buccleuch said: "If they do not provide transport, you ought not to walk. Do it once and they expect it every day." "I walk for health," growled Reed peering back up the dry watercourse.

By following the watercourse, Reed had descended

into hotter air. He sweated as he limped across the open market. The cement on the tarmac had started to crumble. Vibrations from aircraft had given it fatigue. There were crevasses wherein the desert boots shuffled and tripped. "You mean demineralization of the skeleton, Heckie? I take a thousand millipedes of calcium every day."

The Ostrich's automobile was still parked on the cement tarmac. The ministry had voted to park it there always as a decoy duck to attract tourists. The newly-arrived aircraft was parked alongside.

All the passengers from the aircraft had squeezed into the airconditioning. From the white-hot market, the multitude stared in through the glass doors.

Since it was a crossroads rather than a deadend, Jamskoni airport was busier than coastal airports. The coast was wealthier, no doubt, but the passengers spent hard to kill tedium when they flew upcountry and changed aircraft. The spending attracted a commerce and the commerce had acquired a glamour.

There had been a time when the glamour glimmered merely in a panoply of sheikhs and califs. Commerce then was a caravan of camels picking a laden way along a crumbling edge of survival. Nowadays, however, the edge of survival figured in the pickings of crumby travel agencies and in the open market the burden of commerce consisted of glamour itself.

Within the passenger hall was a chill of airconditioning and a feel of plastic slickness. Nevertheless, local snuff could still be sniffed on tobacco mats, and buffalo blood sipped in the brewery. Worm-eaten saddles and hand-carved chains were on sale against a background of radio poetry and a foreground of colonial-style loll chairs. In the passenger hall, the poetry could be avoided nowhere

and the loll chairs encountered everywhere. Stunned with dramnamine, the pasengers had become mesmerized by the poetry and trapped by the chairs. They assumed a horizontality of stretcher cases waiting to be hospitalized.

Out in the crater the sunlight was concentrated. Inside the passenger hall were shadowy diffusions. Reed stamped sand out of the desert boots on to a floor of buffed concrete. A public-address system was calling his name.

Every time Reed's name was called, some passengers leaped up and crowded toward the glass doors. Mrs Buccleuch reassured them: "Ladies and gentlemen," the bearers were dispensing drinks, "could I have your attention for a little minute? A pocket handkerchief has been found in the passenger hall. I repeat. . ."

Reed was dialling on a telephone and failing to get a number. A return spring had rusted. The dial had to be returned each time with finger pressure. Reed tried again.

Trapped like sandy particles in crosscurrents of rival airline time-tables, sick-looking passengers had settled all over the passenger hall. Diffusions of sunlight had contracted pupils in their eyes.

Scattered about were tables of reinforced concrete with lamps at their centres. The lamps were electric bulbs enclosed in ostrich eggs. Illumination from the eggs did not quite reach the tables' edges which were knee high. Some passengers were lying back on loll chairs, groaning and gripping at kneecaps.

While fingering the dial, Reed surveyed posters displayed on the bric-à-brac shop. There were advertisements for bilharzia, Jamskoni airlines, birth control, and a Premji drycleanery which was run by the Minister of Aviation.

Reed spoke quietly into the telephone but a damping of conversation occurred among the passengers. No one looked at Reed but everyone spoke more stealthily. "Is that you, Chief?" The conversation around Reed ceased. "Ah, Reed," a penetrating appeal from the telephone resounded like bugle calls behind barren gorges, "I was trying to get you on the blower." "Sir."

Reed licked his lips. The sunlight had dehydrated him and the hemp for breakfast had charred his mucous membrane. The passengers kept ordering big beers and small vodkas. Every now and then they would look at wristwatches and drink the vodkas. "I have to reprimand you, Reed, for blocking that military take-over." "What?"

A rusty odour in the telephone was drying Reed out further. The telephone had been cleaned with airport soap melted in hot beer. It had been rubbed with a rag dipped in the beery soap and finished with chamois. It shone outside and rusted inside. Reed glanced out through a glass door toward the snowcap of Ol-Skoni. There were boulders embedded in snow up there. They resembled kneeling camels.

"Our role is advisory. Not administrative. The Superintendent has every right to dabble in local politics if he wishes to." "Oh." "Your job is to stop herders, Reed." "The job is done, sir. We mixed up their camels. They started quarrelling. They stopped smuggling."

Mrs Buccleuch had tried to retain a club atmosphere in the hall. Cuttings from mauve tree dahlias, chummy notices, ashtrays stolen from international nightclubs, pingpong table, music-hall posters, complaints book. Inscribed within the complaints book were pleas for attention in terms of lavatory seats left open, canned haggis unfairly distributed, local bingo rules cruelly modified, and so on.

"Herders are contra suggestible," bugled the telephone while the passengers drank more quickly. "More you suppress them, the more aggressive they become." "Do you mean we ought to do nothing?" "It may mean declaring a state of emergency, Reed." Passengers crouching forward on the loll chairs, whitened knuckles clutching the edges of the tables.

The Chief of Mission's voice resounded distinctly in the passenger hall: "Aviation is our best line of defence. Make sure the air force is in good shape." From the telephone, Reed could look out through the glass doors and across the market. As though hypnotized, the passengers emulated him. Necks screwed and heads inclined like bamboo tassels in a monsoon.

Down the alley the Ostrich could be seen. In order to keep it down, he was tying a sack of jowari to the tail of the biplane. Reed turned back to the telephone. "The air force is in fantastic shape," he said.

Swollen stomachs on the passengers were impinging on the edges of the tables and bouncing off with heavy breathing. Legs no thicker than sugarcane were flexed tautly under the loll chairs. The passengers were leaning forward like locusts ready to emigrate. "And keep the passengers in the dark. See what I mean? More passengers mean more revenue. We want them to keep coming back with confidence." "Just a minute," whispered Reed. He hung up.

A hubbub of conversation started up around the passenger hall. "What is the point of mixing up camels?" asked Mrs Buccleuch. "On the grazing area," announced Reed, "everyone drinks blood. It is like a party where you can't find your own glass. You find yourself drinking out of someone else's camel. But don't worry, madam. Even the barman has been sterilized. All wallets and wrist-

watches will be handed to me for safekeeping," Reed broke into a shout. "The air hostess will issue receipts." A queue began to form near Reed. Several passengers were unstrapping watches.

In the kitchen a generator started up with a dull thunk thunk and around the bric-à-brac shop some neon tubes glowed weakly. The bric-à-brac had little to sell except paperweights made of yellow-and-brown striped snails. There was no guarantee that the snails were dead. Indeed some were sliding back and forth imperceptibly on runways of slime.

Mrs Buccleuch came out of the kitchen and Reed asked for a glass of beer. "Order whatever you like," she said. "I have no cash," said Reed. "I gave it all to the Superintendent of Police."

Mrs Buccleuch's head popped out of the bric-à-brac shop. "I can let you have some bric-à-brac on credit," she said softly. "Your sign says quick service," snapped Reed. "Why, so it does." "Shrivelled skull, please," said Reed. "Waterproof or elastic?" asked Mrs Buccleuch. "Well, er . . . ah. . ." "Quick, quick," she smiled beautifully.

She had a habit of conditioning companions with punishments and rewards. "Stop using that Australian accent, Heckie." Or: "Here is a chocolate for remembering to say Mrs." Of course, Reed merely became conditioned to prefer one system of conditioning to another.

A bloated passenger was saying to Mrs Buccleuch: "This beer is shocking. I'll be glad when I've had enough." He was in golf bags and cotton stockings.

Reed stabbed a look at a bloated face and bounced his eyes back on to Mrs Buccleuch. The crimson frock had crumpled somewhat since breakfast, but she seemed to be inflating with beer. She was saying: "You have to fill in

the immigration form, Gerald." The bloated passenger merely stared at Mrs Buccleuch's thighs and said: "I would fill in your form, Helen, but my fountain pen has run dry."

Reed had a habit of browsing on women, much as camels browsed on thornbushes. The browsing was resented by a majority of women and therefore Reed browsed only on a vast minority.

Mrs Buccleuch asked: "Are you on diplomatic mission, Gerald?" "It doesn't matter," said the bloated passenger. "High powered and all that sort of thing. I mean to say. I know the Chief of Mission personally. In the old days he was posted upcountry when I got appointed to the coast."

Reed went into the kitchen but the voice of the bloated passenger came in after him: "You don't realize that this airport really belongs to the coast. My people have been herding on this grazing area for thousands of years. Long before any farmers immigrated here." Reed muttered: "Come to Jamskoni for a clean weekend."

In the kitchen, he opened a fly-gauze safe and saw only bottles of warm water whose bottoms carried red sediment. A margarine packet with yellow oil oozing out of a crack. There was a white sphere cut in half which was supposed to keep things cool. Inside it was a bed of soft red dust, months old.

The passengers had started a bar game of holding neckties up vertically. The game was reminiscent of some forgotten fertility ritual. In turn, the passengers were pulling the neckties straight and then trying to balance them vertically. There were climaxes of laughter.

Faced with a kerosene cooker, Hector Reed began scratching his scalp and then biting scurf out of his nails. He was not entirely useless. He had spent a lifetime spreading butter on poppy rolls with a car key.

The bloated passenger was going on: "There are reports of peaceful herders being molested by waves of aircraft. Herds are getting mixed up. . ." Reed came out of the kitchen. "Making your number, Reed?" asked the bloated passenger. "The ambassador was talking about you only last week." "What ambassador?" "How say?" the bloated face was suffused with grey blood.

Every time the neons around the bric-à-brac flicked off, a cricket stopped chirping. Every time the cricket resumed, the bloated passenger gripped his loll chair more tautly. Mrs Buccleuch said: "Have you met Colonel Lowther, Heckie?" Reed said: "I believe it is hot on the coast." On another side of the market a pye dog emerged from an alley. Without swivelling a bloated neck, the passenger's eyes picked up the dog, considered it, discarded it. "I have an appointment with the District Commissioner," said Colonel Lowther. "Ask them in the bric-à-brac," said Reed. "In the bric-à-brac they would not answer me, Reed." He spoke politely. There was a military moustache. "Why should I know a District Commissioner?" asked Reed. "The District Commissioner knows you," said Lowther. Reed scratched.

Reed's Chief had once been the District Commissioner. He was a skinny twist of dried sinews. He was in his late eighties with scrags of hempish hair faded on a sunpeeled forehead. He usually dressed in pukka mufti which always smelled of curry. He had a scrape in a dry voice which somehow sounded like nailed boots on granite outcrops. As an habitual kaat chewer, he had freckled teeth. He had contracted trachoma on foot safari by shaking hands with sheikhs and then rubbing his eyes. Now he was writing a report in dripping eye fluid. Chin marking time with a steel nib over a counterpane of yellowed letterhead.

Inside a work cell, the Chief looked up from the report

and said: "You are walking for health, Reed?" "Mr Lowther is here to see you, sir." "Tiggy Lowther? Yes. We were dee ohs same time. He got posted to the coast when I was appointed upcountry. Caught up in hero worship of herders. Quite mad."

Stepping into the work cell, Colonel Lowther mumbled something like: "Well now, Pete. Long time no see." Reed said: "Here is Mr Lowther now, sir." The Chief said: "Do not be over optimistic, Reed. Mixing up camels' herds might make the herders dislike each other. . ."

"Hey?" said Reed. Colonel Lowther said: "Ask him if we can take delivery of the automobile immediately." "This is the Chief here," answered Reed. "He can give you an answer right away."

". . . but there is no guarantee that they will start disliking us." "And say I want a reply right now," added Colonel Lowther. Reed scratched his knees.

"Lowther is no more consul general than I am, Reed. But his wife has cee dee plates and parks anywhere," went on the Chief who was perusing some cardboard files. "Mr Lowther is wondering if the automobile is fit to travel," said Reed. "It is part exchange for the biplane." "We keep our part of the agreement and you don't," shouted Lowther. "Very well, Reed," said the Chief. "Say that, in view of the circumstances, we shall deliver the automobile today."

Returning to the passenger hall, Colonel Lowther stumbled a little. Soon with a beer and a vodka he was reenacting his conversation in the work cell. This time he was winning.

"You only make up to me to give yourself importance," said Mrs Buccleuch to Reed, rubbing a beer glass on a counter of the bric-à-brac shop. "I don't suppose you have got any spare beer," he said. The counter was

metallic with a layer of rust beneath a coat of enamel. The glass scraped. Reed ground his teeth.

"Are you going to come and see me tonight?" "Impossible," he said. Across the open market, tribal policemen could be seen moving around among the display mats. "I promise not to touch you." "I cannot," said Reed. "I have to be on duty twenty-four hours a day."

The tribal policemen were making the vendors show identity cards and permits. Instead of showing the cards, some vendors merely handed over paper money. Those with neither paper money nor cards were escorted across to a police point in a whitewashed cell.

The beer glass kept scrubbing enamel off the layer of rust accompanied by grating sounds. "You seem to spend your mental activity entirely on sex," said Mrs Buccleuch. "Why don't you clean out your mind?" "I see." "You are not even listening."

In the open market, about half the multitude now seemed to be made up of tribal policemen. They clustered in groups of twenty or more. They wore crash helmets and long truncheons. "Why are there so many policemen in the market?" she asked. "They are there because they know and respect the law," said Reed.

The airconditioning was succumbing under a weight of heat radiated by the passengers. A stink of furrow came in from the market. Reed seized Mrs Buccleuch's glass and drank a few drops from the bottom of it. The beer tasted like crushed eucalyptus leaves. A table edge was fretting him through the Bombay bloomers. "You better get back to your Chief," she said. "I could tell you some horrible stories about my husband." "All right," said Reed.

Hector Reed stepped outside the airconditioning,

across the tiled veranda, through the hibiscus hedge, on to the tarmac. Shade thrown by the thatching on the brewery was broadening and the multitude was beginning to breathe.

The brewer had spread poko seeds on a mat to dry. But as the multitude broadened with the shade, the seeds became trampled. The brewer's complaints rattled about among poles and withies up in the thatching.

Reed pressed hard against a door on the Chief's work cell before twisting a door handle. It was a technique of entering without noise.

The Chief was still writing the report. Above craggy shoulders and caterpillar eyebrows, the sunpeeled forehead balanced shakily. First few minutes inside the work cell were always vague. The Chief behaved like some actor dissatisfied with a role. His own way of acting was in conflict with a set piece. Reed said: "The herders would seem to be baffled."

The sunpeeled skull did not stir. It was a fragile shell for an unbreakable brain. Some distance from it and presumably controlled by it, a sunburnt hand wrote while yellowed teeth chopped off unrelated phrases.

The hand wrote on in a small compass: ". . . withal an untenable situation and one which . . . coastal resentment . . . traditional frontiers, basic rights of Jamskoni. . ." And so on. The Chief did not look up. "You have nothing to worry about," he said. "Jamskoni seems peaceful enough. It is true. But to take my word for it. The herders are ready for a first-class war." "I take your word, sir," said Reed, scratching himself through a gap in the Bombay bloomers.

The Chief went on to explain that Jamskoni could be depended upon. It was a pocket-handkerchief republic with a corner above cloud level and another corner below

ea level. The farmers in the cloudy corner had a custom of cultivating jowari and carving masks. The herders diagonally opposed to them grazed camels and composed poetry.

The farmers used to laugh at the poetry and the herders derided the masks. Since a certain amount of trading occurred between sculptors and poets, the derision had economic drawbacks. In order to enhance the economy, a united nations' mission had been appointed.

Both appointees to the mission had already served in Jamskoni as colonial officers. Therefore there was little need to explain the drawbacks to them. Having installed themselves in the crater, more or less central to the pocket handkerchief, the Chief and Reed considered ways and means of prolonging their appointments.

Through the barred window in the work cell, the Chief was able to keep an eye on the crater. The barred window was veiled with metallic gauze. Medical tape adhered here and there over rusted wounds. Layers of whitewash around the window were archaeological with fossilized mosquitoes.

Heated air, rippling upward, made the crater appear to be creeping. And a dozen or so camels, descending the basalt ledges, were flickering in and out of focus.

The camels made no hurried movements. Apart from household items such as poles, women, and matting, they were laden with papersacks of hemp. The herders led the camels.

The herders carried spears and small round shields. There were notches in the shields where adversaries' swords were said to be trapped and snapped. Some of the herders wore iron armlets, indicating that they were murderers and therefore marriageable.

Few though they were, there was no mistaking a splin-

tery arrogance in a lack of obvious strength. The herders seemed less hurried than the camels.

The women wore loops of red and yellow neck beads. One or two old men carried snuff horns and crescent-shaped neck rests. Out from the tamarisks near the rim, silently down the dry watercourse they came.

Looking out through the metallic gauze, the Chief of Mission remarked: "Been here longer than you. Familiar with the sheikhs, you understand. And I can tell when the atmosphere comes oppressive." "You don't suppose the United Nations could afford airconditioning, sir?" "By George, Reed. No."

The work cell had been built inside the crater by a colonial power who exercised dominion over palm and pine. Up among the pines just now a hot spell was making the glacier drip more and the rainforest drip less. Down among the palms some final shreds of heat were breaking up camels.

The work cell was handy to the open market. There had been a time when the farmers and the herders used to meet in the market for trading. The colonial power had put a cess barrier on the market to tax the trading. As they approached the cess barrier, the camels appeared to be walking on pneumatic cushions.

Inside the work cell, Hector Reed started sighing ventilation down inside the safarishirt. "It is not the atmosphere so much as the stagnation," he explained. "A little movement in the air would make a big difference."

The herders stared across the cess barrier at the multitude and the spears made a little movement in the air. "We ought to be able to fix you up, Reed," said the Chief. "With a little luck, that is." "By George, sir."

In the Bombay bloomers and bare knees, Reed was sweating. The Chief had fixed himself up in jodhpurs

and puttees. Both appointees were standing under an iron roof which crackled and crashed through the hot spell.

Radiations from the iron roof reflected back and forth within the work cell and opened Reed's pores. The crackles were sprinkling rust into the pores. The Chief kept jerking about and moving his arms, but his skin remained as slick and as dry as a lizard's. "Things are warming up," murmured the Chief jerking across to the window for another look at the herders.

Humidity in Reed's sighs was being filtered by the safarishirt so that it gathered around the bloomers and drained down the bare knees. "If we do not fix things now, we never shall," he whined. "Right you are. You see, Reed? You have hit the nail on the head."

The table between the Chief and Reed supported reports on yellowed letterhead, a pressure lamp, assorted rounds from missing guns, and a sprinkling of rust. It was mid-afternoon yet no office boy had turned out to blow up the lamp. The work cell reeked of smouldering colonialism. The lamp had burnt out long ago yet a bitter aftermath laced the air.

Shoved by the hot spell, sheets of iron on the roof were jostling each other and broadcasting crackles across the market. Beyond the cess barrier it sounded as though the market were in business.

True, the mats were dressed with pigeon peas, unroasted coffee cherry, sugarcane, unshelled groundnuts. But the passengers clung to the airconditioning and the vendors clung to shadows thrown by work cells.

Outside the cess barrier, the camels halted and the women huddled behind them. The herders pushed aside the cess barrier and walked into the market. They tapped the spears on the barrier as they passed. The tribal police-

men in the market stopped extorting bribes and started patting the heads of babies.

Unlike the passengers whose journeys were timed by stopwatch, the herders had itineraries timed by calendar. They were not compulsive buyers. They were given to discussing prices sometimes for days.

On the sandy floor, open sandals were a torture. Searing trickles of sand coursed between the herders' toes. A combined heat load of sunlight, dusty air, and searing sand added up to ten times the herders' metabolic rate. As was customary, they survived by disregarding the torture.

Reed was saying: "Nothing raises the temperature more than a lack of circulation." "Get the herders off the battlefield and around the discussion table." "What say, sir?" Reed looked out through the barred window and jumped. "Nothing to it," he whimpered.

Quinine deafness in the Chief was sporadic. "The camels are not crowding the furrow," he rasped. "It means they came across Ol-Skoni to avoid immigration fees. What the herders don't understand is that without immigration chits they are not allowed in the market." "You can see they are worried stiff."

Dishonesty was the herders' offence. Having recently traversed mirages that looked like glaciers and glaciers that looked like mirages they were no doubt suffering from exhaustion, exposure, and loneliness. Yet instead of leaning upon them, they carried the spears. Instead of sheltering in shadow, they stepped boldly in sunlight. And instead of hobnobbing they exchanged an occasional twitter. Disgusted by the dishonesty, some tribal policemen went over to an armoury and worked at blancoing webbing straps. Others dispersed down alleys and laneways into the commercial sector.

Built like splinters, creased and cured from the exposure, the herders were about as tough as sandblasted wormwood. The spears were as brittle as heedless pride. They had power nowhere except in demeanour. And what should an expert like Reed offer in substitute? Plastic valises and straw hats.

Through the barred window Reed called: "Come and have half a calabash in the brewery." It was a phrase that flowed off his tongue. As he became more feverish, Reed's vernacular improved. A festering uvula vibrated ropily. The herders drew back. A religion forbade alcohol.

In fluent vernacular the Chief snapped at them. He told them to smarten up and pay their chits. The herders smiled. Thus alternately scowling at Reed's hospitality and smiling at the Chief's hostility, the herders circulated in the open market. They bought nothing but they poked spear hafts at the produce and wares.

The market was circular. To one side in the commercial sector the alley led down between dukas and godowns. Opposite the alley, the cess barrier opened on to the crater.

"If you look at them too much," murmured the Chief, "they start the shakes." "Is that so?" muttered Hector Reed.

"If you do not look at them, they stop playing up." Reed started and turned his eyes away from the herders toward the alley, which was busier than both the market and the work cell put together. The biplane was parked down there and the ministry of aviation was setting it up.

The biplane was parked down the alley between the ministry and the Premji drycleanery. Stinging sand, raised by the biplane's arrival, was settling and the drycleanery was in business.

Instead of wasting time with tools, the Ostrich was

manipulating barehanded. Maybe it was a risky way to set up the biplane. But it was a sure way to cripple the Ostrich.

He was using fingers as a paint brush. After dipping them in a distillation of wood tar, he was smearing spruce ribs on the biplane. The distillation protected the ribs and attacked the fingers.

Even though the fingers were scuffed and stained, the Ostrich was elegantly dressed. He had slipped into fresh overalls of silk warp and worsted weft. A pair of garage sneakers were dull from dubbining. He wore an Eton tie about a Jamskoni neck. There was a bleach of kwashiokor through a frizzled hairdo.

Except for a smile, the Ostrich was as black as paint. From time to time the smile was directed up the alley, across the market and past the brewer, who was shaving the Superintendent of Police with a broken bottle.

The Superintendent was seated within the brewery whose floor was spread with poko seeds. The seeds had to catch sufficient skull to put body in a batch of beer.

The Superintendent drew a governmental salary to tend the cess barrier. But since he was also pomaded by the brewer, he used to remit some cesses. As a consequence, there was a dearth of aviation in Jamskoni and an abundance of poko seeds.

With twittery shouts and blows on front legs, the women induced the camels to kneel. The camels folded down, grunting and bleating. Green spittle hung from rubbery lips.

Beyond the cess barrier, the crater disappeared behind a curtain of haze. The camels knelt before the curtain while the women unloaded them. They kneeled in shadow under the doum palm near the ancient well.

After unloading the camels, the women had to fit

matting over curved poles to construct domed dwellings. But every time the Ostrich smiled up the alley, the dwellings collapsed. There was a theory that the smile had evolved from a baboon's snarl.

In the arena of the open market, watched by the multitude, the herders began smiling back at the Ostrich. They were as thin as splinters with hairdos of terracotta. The spears were fashioned from spare propeller blades stolen from the ministry.

One of the herders carried the truncated python. No doubt he was a special case. He stood between the women and the alley as though to ward off the Ostrich's smile.

Among the kneeling camels a few splintery children were flicking slings and sending stones on high trajectories. The stones kept falling around the market, crashing on to sheets of roof iron. The crashing blinked Reed's eyes for him.

Presumably the children were aiming at weaver-birds and unable to extrapolate the trajectories. Be that as it might, the extrapolations were tolling the iron roofs and Reed was grinding his teeth. He scratched his knees as he paced about the work cell.

He squinted through bars in the window. Over on the glazed tiles of the passenger hall, two or three herders were stoking charcoals in a porcelain brazier. The charcoals had to smoulder all day on the veranda, simmering carafes of coffee.

The herders were tinted like the charcoals and they seemed to smoulder. In late-afternoon sunlight, fumes spiralled about. The herders remained distinguishable as part of the fumes that did not dissipate. They poked the charcoals with the spears.

The brewer was watching the herders. A dignity and importance in his calling were implicit in a pomp and

intricacy of gesture. While watching out through the mangrove poles around the brewery, he conversed with the Superintendent in insinuating tones.

When a tuft of thatching on the brewery was displaced by a stone, the brewer stopped insinuating and merely shouted at the children. At once, the herders at the charcoals waved at the brewer with red-hot spears. Thereupon the brewer discontinued shouting and resumed barbering.

Down the alley, the Ostrich pulled a leather helmet on to the frizzled skull and pushed mica goggles over bloodshot eyes. He climbed in among the spruce ribs, banged at self starters and taxied up the alley.

After the biplane had sent a blast of sandy particles into the drycleanery, one of the Ostrich's wives came out and kicked the distillation of wood tar. It flew across the alley and splashed against the ministry.

Explosions from the twin engines were ringing around the market. In the work cell, the Chief of Mission happened to be raking finger-nails across some wallpaper. He raised his grating voice above the explosions and Reed hopped about as though agitated by cries of distress.

"The grazing area will toughen you up, Reed," a few strands of sisal hair had tangled with caterpillar eyebrows across the sunpeeled forehead. "Even if it kills you it cannot do you any real harm." Under the wallpaper there was an obstruction. The finger-nails probed.

"No one knows how long you may last out there. . ." "You are bringing out unnecessary risks," cried Reed. Behind the wallpaper two scorpions stopped courting or devouring each other and rushed out through a seam. Late-afternoon sunlight coming through the barred window glanced off them. They glinted like granite. ". . . but I have had lots of dealings with herders and many of them

are still alive. Do not get too friendly. You will find them dignified but do not be misled." "Mind, sir."

The wallpaper was composed of survey maps, pasted up to represent Jamskoni republic. Printed words such as "district" and "tribal" had been crossed out and words such as "governmental" and "democratic" written in. Some of the maps even had half tints. Where termites had made depredations, sinuous lines indicated gullies, or ridges, or artistic impulses.

The finger-nails ground the scorpions into granite outcrops as the Chief rasped on: "No good being sensitive about outside interference. You cannot expect the Minister to keep out of the picture." Framed by the window, the biplane taxied into view across the market. "You mean the office boy?" snarled Reed. The explosions from the twin engines were making damp smears vibrate on the safarishirt.

Conventional signs on the wallpaper stood out distinctly except in a cobwebby corner where Jamskoni extended into hazy legends. There was supposed to be a frontier up there somewhere. It was lost in a confusion of dusty trails where the finger-nails had blazed across the plain of dust. "He wants to clean up the mess himself. But we must stand firm, Reed." "There must be some misunderstanding."On the blazing plain there was always a good deal of misunderstanding. The herders were wandering in from mirage country, behaving as though the frontier had vanished. They belonged to the coastal sheikhdom yet they appeared to own Jamskoni.

A few months earlier, the office boy could have cleaned up the misunderstanding with a feather duster. Now it called for the Minister with the biplane.

Following recent democratic elections, the office boy had been promoted to Minister of Aviation. His bony

carcass crouched now in control. "Have you ever noticed how disloyal ministers of aviation can be, sir?" "What's that, Reed?" "You drag them out of the gutter and give them a career. And what thanks do you get?"

Across the open market the Ostrich's spruce ribs were shaking within the canvas fuselage. The landing wheels were laying down grooves which the slipstream tore up immediately. The wheels had been stripped of fairing to avoid clogging. One of them was soft.

The Chief's hands dropped and a clap of curry dust arose from the jodhpurs. Hector Reed was sweating a quart every hour. "Ah, come now, Reed. Where is your sporting spirit?" A lopsided wing was flicking gobs of tar into the brewery.

The Ostrich was favouring the soft wheel by leaning away from it. "Well, does anyone know which side he is on?" A need to shout invigorated the conversation. "He is on Jamskoni's side, of course," screeched the Chief.

Standing at the cess barrier, the lone herder blocked the biplane's course. By accelerating a propeller, the Ostrich changed direction and blasted every poko seed out of the brewery. As the biplane taxied toward the cess barrier, the brewer waved farewell with the broken bottle. "So I gather," yelled Reed.

Wearing the nineteen-twenty helmet and a medieval smile, the Ostrich peered ahead through the vee-shaped windshield. Behind the biplane, the market tore itself to shreds. Before the biplane, the herder stood motionless. A group of withered camels, up from being unloaded, clustered restlessly around the furrow.

The furrow was lined with white clay which softened under water. Some of the softness went into the water. There was a tendency to froth. Reed licked his lips.

The herder wore the python like a shawl. The camels

clonked and stumbled yet the herder was still. Liquid black eyes regarded nothing but the Ostrich. With declining sunlight behind him, the herder projected a shadow through the cess barrier and across the market. From the veranda, several passengers stared back across the market at the herder. "By gad. Gotta keep the beggars down."

When the twin engines were switched off, the landing wheels sank into the sandy floor. The biplane halted. Even though a propeller swung by his face, the herder did not move. Some other herders, crouched over the brazier, did not look up. But they leaned toward the biplane like sprinters beginning a race. In the work cell the Chief observed: "He has learned to stand thus between camels and lions." Reed sharpened his teeth by grinding jaws together.

"That herder is quite mad," he said quietly. The Chief added: "Only a youngster too, to judge by the beard on his chin. Lunatics are more dangerous than buffalo in the bush. All the same, this one is too old to be fobbed off with baby talk." "He is raising the spear. Is he in some sort of a trance?" "That is it, Reed. You see? You have found the right answer immediately."

Like the Chief, the herder was dry of texture. Fumes from Reed were condensing on the Chief's spectacles. The Chief took off the spectacles and dangled them in the sunlight. Once they were heated, the spectacles no longer condensed Reed's fumes.

The finger-nails went back on to the survey maps, tracking down scamperings beneath the plain of dust. There was little to hear in the work cell except a dusty scrape in the Chief's voice and a crackling of finger-nail warfare. "There is something about their endurance, sir. They survive where others perish." "Don't worry, Reed.

Their kidneys are as good as yours. They might moan and groan while you look calm. But they will take just as long to die. On the average, of course." "Oh."

Hector Reed paced about the work cell scratching the bare knees. The scratching destroyed nerve endings which took twenty minutes to sprout again. Twenty scratchless minutes.

While shaking the sandy floor through a beer strainer, the brewer shouted at the Ostrich. The strainer had been woven from palm fibres. It was separating fine sand and little poko seeds from coarse sand and large poko seeds. The shaking affected the multitude who surged around the brewery shouting an accompaniment.

At the cess barrier, the Ostrich dropped into view from the side hatch in the fuselage. He was carrying a footpump and he was grinning. He put the footpump by the soft wheel. While the rhythm in the multitude's shouts grew heavier, the Ostrich approached the herder. And when, without regarding it, he ran fingers over the python, the herder began to shake with the heavy rhythm. All the other herders were staring.

At no time did the Ostrich really look at the shakes. He did not even look at what he was doing. While seeming to regard the rim of the crater, he grasped the tip of the python's tail and nicked it on the herder's spear. The spear began to jab and the Ostrich's grin gaped into a savage smile.

Instead of inflating the soft wheel, the Ostrich inflated the python. He inserted a connection into the nick on the python. Holding the connection between crippled fingers, he stepped on to the footpump. There was a muffled blurt and a pimple appeared in the hide.

Using footpower, the Ostrich drove heated air from the crater through the connection. The pimple developed into

a cyst. Rhythmic blurts coming from the footpump conformed with the shouting of the multitude. Since the herder's shakes were keeping time with the same shouting, the blurts from the footpump were keeping time with the shakes. In such circumstances, the shakes soon stopped.

To engulf antelopes, the python's hide had to be elastic. It swelled now with internal pressure. The Ostrich stamped. The hide inflated as it peeled away from lower tissues. Normally, skinning a python took all night.

Still smiling at the rim, the Ostrich unhooked the connection. The herder ran the spearblade along the inflated python. The hide peeled away like a mackintosh. The multitude stopped shouting. When they saw the naked python, the herders nodded slowly.

"Never try drinking your own piss, Reed." "What?" "Accomplishes nothing. It is already as concentrated as your kidneys can make it." "Oh." "What the body needs is salt and low-concentrated water. Otherwise the blood gets thicker and your heart has a heavier load. You cannot spread heat fast enough across your skin." "And sweat, sir? Are we allowed to drink sweat?" Reed's hair was pointing in many directions. He jerked and roared hoarsely.

The sunlight was striking obliquely. Skimming off the sandy floor, bumping against the crater wall and flashing on into eternity. Shadow from the crater rim encroached upon the market. More passengers were coming out of the airconditioning on to the veranda.

The self starters churned and the propellers spun. The landing wheels pulled out of the sandy floor and the Ostrich taxied along the airstrip.

The Chief of Mission bent the sunpeeled forehead over a yellowed report labelled "Herders". He looked at Reed over the presbyopic spectacles. "You might run into

trouble," he sighed, "but don't expect too much." "Am I supposed to start trouble or stop it?" "If things don't liven up, my people may have to send in the air force to show what civilization really means." "Your people? Surely you won't exploit them while I am still expendable."

The finger-nails were tearing shreds off the report. A top lip drew back over long teeth. There was a rumpled look in the tangled eyebrows and a sag in the Chief's cheeks. Times had changed.

"Herders are as good as anyone else, Reed. Long as they toe the line. Get them sorted out. You may be able to stir up something." The biplane had leaped away from the cess barrier like a crippled sprinter. It sheared away through heat fumes.

The birdbaths on the airstrip made the wings flutter. The Ostrich shoved the column well forward and the wheels hugged the baths. The biplane cruised shakily on the sandy floor. "Do you mean we have to play it off the cuff, sir?"

Out in the crater, a disturbance like a bushfire indicated where the biplane had taxied. The multitude flooded out across the shadow of the rim. The charcoals hissed in the porcelain brazier as the spears poked at them. The herders crouched around the brazier. They had rigged the python hide to a mangrove pole.

"Would it be bad taste to ask for transport, sir?" The Chief's eyes blinked like a hippo's nostrils: "No problem, you know. It's downhill. We can fly you out." "I beg your pardon." "Well, take the automobile. But don't flog it over the grazing area. It is rather touchy about drifts."

As the afternoon cooled, the multitude stripped off the raiment and dressed up the display mats. The passengers

spilled down from the tiled veranda. They haggled over wickerwork baskets, pots varnished a colour of mango, skullcaps beaded in purple and orange, prayer bottles carved in cedarwood, hookah sections transformed into candlesticks.

By way of small change, the multitude offered strings of fossilized shells, antique venetian beads, Maria Theresa thalers dated two centuries back. Usually, the passengers valued the change more than the wares. In order to receive large quantities of the small change, the passengers bought small quantities of the wares.

Hector Reed drove a trifle wildly to pick up draught through butterfly windows. A jack handle rattled. The automobile swerved around the market past some cannon balls and spiky doors before the tribal policemen's armoury. It drifted a little on sand particles near the cess barrier.

In a dazzle from late-afternoon sunlight, a dust cloud floating along the biplane's trail had become opaque. Reed navigated on dead reckoning by taking bearings through a rear-vision mirror.

In the mirror the work cell was diminishing as a magnified reflection. The Chief was bent over the cardboard files like a praying mantis. Pulling up the jack handle from under the desert boots, Reed began to whistle. He frowned through a butterfly window at the herders. They were using the spears as branding irons.

Reed had continually explained that spears became dangerously soft when heated. Moreover, once branded, the python hide lost market value. But nowadays in truth no one could tell the herders anything. They were getting out of hand.

They belonged to the coastal sheikhdom yet they complained of having no vote in the republic. They were as

fragile as splinters yet farmers stepped aside for them in the market.

Like too many drivers, the Ostrich had used to run the automobile as an extension of his own personality. That was to say, he seemed to expect the automobile to withstand harder knocks than other vehicles. As a result, the automobile had been belted too fast too often over a nine-thousand-foot contour, and shock absorbers were detached. Riding on suspension springs, it sprang about like a gazelle.

Instead of grasping the steering wheel, Reed held the jack handle against his lips. Fingering it as though it were a flute, he whistled a series of notes and played an accompaniment on an accelerator with a desert boot. The automobile roared a bass for the flute's treble and lolloped away around the market. From atop the rib cage of the decrepit elephant, the white-headed vulture uttered a raucous note. Reed curved around behind the ancient well and back toward the tarmac.

The ancient well was really a soak where the dry watercourse terminated. Rainstorms, dumped up on the rim, rinsed down heavy elements to the floor of the crater. Thus a bed of black sand had built up around the well. The bed excited geiger counters and withered the jowari crops, castor beans, manioc plants, grapefruit and clove trees.

The camels were wandering about, taking a second drink at the clay trough. They always drank only half enough at a time. Hard mounds of fat wobbled on their spines. A glugging came from their rumens.

A young camel was sitting in the furrow and being nudged by the weaver-birds. Flesh of a pallid hairless grey was shrinking in between bones. The camel had been left where the furrow could lick at it. Sand beneath

the camel kept being sucked away along the furrow and, like the elephant, the flesh and bones sank into the crater floor.

Around the well, there was always a smell of moisture. Around there at times could be heard splashes of water and snatches of song. The bearers worked there at sluicing furrows and coaxing women in from the arid crater.

In the late afternoon, the black bed was hot and the bearers had dried up. In silence they lay under grapefruit foliage and smoked hemp flavoured with dried buds and calices of cloves. Cooled by the foliage and drugged by the hemp, they were nodding drowsily at a few herder women.

The women belonged to the herders. Since they were unmarried and therefore forbidden to drink tea, they obtained tannin by chewing acacia bark into shreds. When twisted the shreds became twine. When woven the twine became milktight gourds.

The women were wearing yellow face paste as a prelude to an evening party. Reed stopped fluting. Such women had always been hunted. They were taller than farmer women and more benign. Their skins were said to remain cold on hot nights.

The women wore baskets and long swirling fabrics. Ends of fabrics were held in teeth or caught in crooks of elbows. They had shawls twisted around long narrow heads. Each walked with a hand raised to shoulder level.

Two or three in russet olive had sought out a backdrop of doum palm seedlings whose trunks were wrapped in damp hessian. Others in citrus yellow stood against the grapefruit foliage. They were filling the baskets with embellishment as well as with nourishment. Eyelids were smudged in fine kohl powder.

Statuesque and provocative, the women interfered with Reed's driving. The automobile ceased lolloping

and proceeded smoothly. Reed's eyes darted about behind a windscreen.

The women had erected the domed dwellings not far from the ancient well. Since they consisted of walls woven over hooped poles, the dwellings could be folded and carried by the camels. They were domed sacs of air whose floors were carpeted with unscoured wool. Reed drove through between them.

Around the brazier, the herders looked up. Their eyes glittered with reflections from the charcoals. When Reed fluted a few more notes on the jack handle, one of them gestured with a branding iron. The women chattered. A flock of weaver-birds stopped drawing stones from the children's slings and started chopping up a jowari patch.

Reed slowed the automobile and the herder came forward. A thin ashy smoke rose from the spearblade. Other herders looked on.

Reed braked to a stop. Leaning out of the automobile he poked the jack handle at papersacks which had been unloaded by the women. All business in the market came to a standstill. Instead of crouching around the display mats, passengers and vendors were upright and facing toward the papersacks. The Chief looked out of his cell.

Every time the jack handle gave a poke, a hole appeared in the papersacks. A cannabic odour accompanied by shreds of hemp came out. Every time the jack handle poked, the hot spearblade jabbed at the automobile. Flakes of enamel fell off the bodywork.

Some distance along the floor of the crater, the biplane revved. A spiralling wind came away from it, and a swishing came from the dwellings. Scraps of matting circled skyward. A fibre gourd fell over and milk hissed on to charcoals. An aroma of scalded milk made the women chatter more loudly.

The automobile was idling in neutral. Reed hopped out. His face was white. "Me say all time," he mouthed in vernacular, "hot spear bad." The herder in advance of the others had withdrawn the spearblade from the charcoals in the brazier. The blade was red. Fine sparks kept forming and crackling off it. A pencil line of smoke reeked off a narrow tip. It smelled like a forge.

Twisting it about in his fingers as though considering a texture of leather, the herder felt the blade for some seconds. "No hot," he said in vernacular worse than Reed's. Hair, usually slouching on Reed's forehead now stood up like porcupine bristles. The other herders shook their heads. They withdrew spears from the brazier and fingered the tips slowly. "No hot," they said after appearing to consider the tips.

Reed put a hand over his heart. An accelerating rhythm was making the safarishirt vibrate. Turning, he opened a nearside door. A return spring was broken on the accelerator and the automobile idled too fast. Leaning over, he pulled up the accelerator pedal. The rhythm subsided.

He expelled a long breath. A smell of smoke came out from under the dashboard. Reed traced the smell and poked at tangled wiring. Placing the spearblade across Reed's behind, the herder asked. "You call that hot?" Reed barked like a deer and printed a cobweb-shaped system of stresses on the windscreen with his forehead.

When Reed unfolded himself from under the dashboard, the safarishirt was shown to be tattered where various knobs had clutched. A multitudinous gasp came from the market, but the herders did not appear to notice. Slowly they were returning the spearblades to the charcoals.

On the forehead a lump was solidifying. On the Bombay bloomers a triangle was evaporating. Reed whistled.

Sitting lopsidedly he selected a gear at random and lolloped away. While accelerating, he waggled the jack handle at the herders. One or two looked away but the others stared into the charcoals.

Hector Reed drove across to the governmental workshop and parked beside the biplane. As he alighted he was muttering.

Sitting around an earthen mound, some splintery children were playing with goats' knucklebones. The mound was broken open, and the children were eating termites from within it. They took turns at tossing the bones in elaborate manipulations. Upon making an error, a child passed the bones and ingested the termites.

As a meal, the termites were palatable, nutritious, and well balanced. The herders were always going on about living on nothing but courage. But in fact they were brought up on high-grade protein.

One of the children slung a stone at Reed. Then, approaching, he appealed for baksheesh. When Reed shook his head, rubbing an ankle and dancing about, the child began looking for another stone.

The Ostrich was maintenancing the biplane. He had a toolbox whose shelves floated on swivels, to present a staggered display of hundreds of implements. The Ostrich was looking at the display and scratching the scar on his cheek.

Reed shouted: "You see those new dwellings by the ancient well? There is some sort of trouble over there." "Best place for it." "Why do the women put on that yellow face paste? They look hideous." "It is to remove wrinkles, old bean." "What's it called?" "Wrinkle paste."

Having taxied too far with a soft wheel, the biplane was giving off fumes of smouldering tyre. Reed had to cough:

"What are you going to do, Ostrich?" "Adjust the atomizer to the supplementary exhaust, you know."

The tyre could not be discarded until officially written off by an audit board. The writing off was a ritual bequeathed by the colonial power. "What difference will it make, then?" "It is when you spray insecticide across the crater, Hector." In any case, there were no spare tyres for the biplane. "When you spray how?"

The Ostrich croaked: "With the biplane. Have you seen the wrest pin?" He gave the toolbox another inspection, then he looked up and said: "No, not that. That is a tyre pressure gauge. Is that it over by the camshaft bush?" Suddenly he smiled and Reed stepped back: "Don't bother, old chap. It will turn up eventually."

There was a lorry driver on duty at the workshop. He was rubbing a tongue over parched lips and his leather soles were curling from drought. He came over to speak with Reed and gripped a thumb as he shook hands. It was a sign of a request to come. Reed shook his head before speaking. The lorry driver frowned.

He wore a hennaed beard and a turban starched with rice. He set the turban on a waterbarrel while he combed the beard. "What is your news of many days?" he asked in a guttural twitter. While explaining the news, Reed thumped the waterbarrel. No glug of water came out but the turban was dislodged. It slipped down and the rice starch cracked as the barrel rolled on it.

Once a turban was cracked, it could not be rerolled without relaundering. In the governmental workshop the relaundering was impossible. There was not even any water for drinking.

Reed told a joke about a cracked mind but the lorry driver said he did not understand. He walked away when Reed started to explain.

The late sunlight was slanting under a rusted roof on the workshop. All day the lorry driver had waited in shadow by a loading ramp. Toward sundown, he had been looking out through rust holes in a corrugated-iron fence and rattling a waterbottle.

The water for the workshop was supposed to come every day from the ancient well. It was kept in the barrel on a cement stand. It could be drunk simply by sucking at a rubber siphon. But because of a bombastic attitude of the tribal policemen, no water had arrived today. After a while, whenever the lorry driver rattled the water-bottle, Reed hawked in his throat.

The Ostrich could be heard fretting at a puncture in the soft wheel. Soon there was a sulphurous stink of vulcanized rubber. Duco on the automobile desiccated into freckles and edges of the freckles lifted. The edges packed themselves under Reed's finger-nails.

Once or twice he left the automobile and sucked at the siphon. No water came out but flakes of rust, swishing inside the barrel, sounded like a distant ocean. "They must make battery water around here somewhere," muttered Reed. The lorry driver said: "Haa."

An enormous sun was radiating remarkable colours through an endless atmosphere. With no clouds to interrupt them, the colours faded flawlessly one into another. For a few minutes the governmental workshop was modelled in molten gold. A wrest spanner in the Ostrich's fingers tinkled musically. He was tuning an aileron wire drag.

The sunlight was refracting double concentric rainbows off Ol-Skoni mountain. Rain up there had condensed out of cloudless air. Reed licked his lips. Above the rim of the crater, a yellow creaminess of evening sunlight touched the canopy of the rainforest.

"Cannot you stop the riot?" asked Reed. "What riot, old sport?" A succession of crashes was coming from the open market. Platoons of tribal policemen had come into the market. They were loading and reloading regimental shotguns in response to orders rustled at them by the Superintendent. They stood in formation. They loaded in unison. The crashes came from beer gourds which the multitude was throwing at them.

By driving it over the ramp, Hector Reed had to load the automobile on to a lorry. The lorry had been backed until a dray almost touched the ramp. The automobile had to go pickaback.

The lorry was remarkably new. Both it and the lorry driver had been hired from the coastal sheikhdom where it had been purchased on foreign aid. Upcountry, the newness was a rarity.

As a rule, most foreign aid was spent on the coast. Since they were accessible to steamers, foreign embassies had been established down there and the aid had to be spent under their supervision.

If the republic of Jamskoni could be made to create its own airline, then foreign aid might be induced to strike twice. Once on the coast and again upcountry. This at any rate was how the Ostrich explained his crippled fingers.

So far the ministry of aviation had done little more than create turmoil. For political reasons, the Superintendent of Police opposed the ministry. And for commercial reasons, the multitude favoured it. Between the tribal policemen and the multitude there was a continuous conversation about multifacialism and neobaloneyism. The turmoil was more grammatical than guerrilla.

Worn out by atrocities being committed upon their vernacular, watercarriers had gone on strike. The governmental workshop thirsted.

SOUTH ASIA

The shadow from the crater rim had stretched across the ancient well. Among the domed dwellings some crackers exploded. The explosions were for a wedding and could not be mistaken for gunshots. But just then the Ostrich happened to be taking a rifle out of the toolbox.

Voices could be heard outside the corrugated-iron fence around the workshop. Cooking fires over near the doum palm were projecting fragments of light through rust holes in the fence. A fragrance of kindling camel dung beat back the mosquitoes. Reed could no longer spit.

While the lorry driver waved signals at him, Reed manœuvred the automobile on to the dray. By straining steering and ruining a clutch he was able to inch the automobile's tyres about. Holes had to be cut in the dray between the tyres and the lorry driver insisted that they be symmetrical. Symmetry might have been an economy on the coast. Upcountry it was an extravagance.

Waves of heat were flowing skyward from the workshop. The automobile was a bomb of hot air. "Are you going to borrow my micrometer?" asked Reed after backing off and running on four times. The lorry driver straightened a tyre by kicking it.

A railing around the dray prevented the nearside door from opening more than a little. Reed half squirmed out, transferring grease from the door to the safarishirt. He lay half in and half out of the automobile, caught in a scissor grip of the door.

He was lying thus, inspecting a bruise on the tyre, when the corrugated iron around the workshop gave a jangling. The lorry driver jumped up into the lorry's cab and gunned a motor. The Ostrich, crouching near the dray, was pulling at a bolt of the rifle. By its grinding, the bolt indicated that it was clogged with sand.

Pulsations from the lorry's motor made the door of the

automobile chew at Reed. He managed to retract into the automobile. The corrugated iron jangled again. Reed wound all windows shut.

The pulsations were tossing Reed about. Drops of sweat jumped off him in all directions. It might have been thought that, with two sets of suspension springs beneath him, Reed would be doubly comfortable. No thought could be more misleading. With the two sets, irregularities in the floor became aggravated and vibrations in the automobile became exaggerated.

The lorry rolled away from the loading ramp with a jerk. Having been amplified through the lorry's springs and the automobile's springs, the jerk threw Reed up against the automobile's roof. The automobile began sliding backward off the dray.

He trod on a brake pedal and gripped the steering wheel while spare parts formed a vibrating vortex around him. The jack handle clanked along under the roof and then took a chip off the windscreen.

Before it rolled over him, the Ostrich emerged from under the dray. Carrying the automobile, the lorry continued across the workshop. Still half kneeling, the Ostrich staggered along keeping the lorry between himself and the jangles in the corrugated iron. He was straining at the rifle bolt. A round was jammed.

The floor was littered with sand pockets and chunks of basalt. Momentarily deformed, the lorry's tyres converted every irregularity into a finite acceleration which flashed upward through the suspension springs and made the automobile hop about on the dray.

The upward acceleration was further boosted by suspension springs in the automobile so that Reed ricocheted about as though galloping on a camel.

The automobile slid further back upon the dray. While

continuing to gallop, Reed managed to switch on ignition and to engage a gear. He rotated the tyres to counteract the backsliding. He needed about ten inches to regain a safe tenure. No one had ever driven a rougher ten inches.

Being unable to pull it enough for an ejector to function, the Ostrich tried to slam home the bolt. But having been half ejected, the round could no longer slide back into a breech. Its leaden bullet acquired mutilation marks and its shell became bent and split.

Now and then the Ostrich peered through a slit between the dray and the automobile. The jangles along the corrugated iron were deploying. Some shouting came from the domed dwellings. In a flickering light from the cooking fires, shadowy forms could be seen racing here and there.

The rust holes in the fence allowed intermittent glimpses. A rhythmic drumming had started up near the well. Playing in perfect unison, the drums were approaching the workshop.

Each drum contributed to an orchestration of weird precision. Usually, in craze sessions, one or other of the drummers would lack lightning reflexes necessary to induce hysteria. But the approaching orchestra was of surpassing teamwork. Reed crouched within the automobile.

Around the workshop, the corrugated-iron fence was giving off reports like a machine-gun. A rattling series of jangles was smothering the drum orchestra. The children were dragging sticks across the corrugations.

Angry whoops came from the domed dwellings. The machine-gun effect died and the drumming arose louder and closer. Trembling with amplified vibrations, Reed groped after the skittering jack handle within the automobile.

With arm muscles cramped in a strain of holding himself down, Reed rocked his head from side to side avoid-

ing the spare parts as they flew about. Expanding jolts from the lorry's tyres kept flashing through two sets of suspension springs.

The springs retained each jolt until it had gathered itself into an accelerating surge. Then they gave it to Reed. He arose on each surge and then took off like a stone from a sling.

He could see none of the jolts coming, but he felt all of them going. And he recorded many as skull marks on the roof. Meanwhile, he was striving to drive a straight ten inches.

While the drum orchestra was advancing on the workshop, Reed tried to hold himself below windscreen level. But the suspension springs were stronger than his arms. Despite his efforts, he kept bobbing up and peeping out.

Upon noticing the bobbing and peeping, the Ostrich beside the dray bent his knees and tugged harder at the rifle bolt. Inside the cab, the lorry driver was staring at Reed in a rear-vision mirror. With eyes fixed on Reed's reflected frequencies, the lorry driver drove against a welding plant. Almost immediately, Reed drove into the cab. The lorry driver stared at a dent in the cab and he frowned.

While Reed detached his forehead from the windscreen in the automobile, the lorry driver rushed over to the welding plant and donned an asbestos mask. It could have been a a suit of armour. He picked up an oxy-acetylene torch and brandished it.

When the torch was thrust under his petrol tank, Reed squirmed out of the automobile despite having insufficient doorspace. Wildly, he looked around. The drum orchestra was invading the governmental workshop.

The entire orchestra was being carried by a donkey. Tiny tripping hooves were sending reverberations

through a load of kerosene tins. Some of the tins contained water so that their tones varied while the drumming remained synchronous. The donkey cantered up to the cement stand and the orchestra shook the workshop with a finale.

By applying less effort to the rifle bolt, the Ostrich extracted the mutilated round. Hector Reed spoke to him while the lorry driver burned holes in the dray. "In handling weapons," explained Reed, "the trick is not to get excited."

While the Ostrich's face creased behind a double row of sharky teeth, Reed screwed up his eyes at a bright-blue spark on the oxy-acetylene torch. Accompanying the donkey, an elderly lady squinted at a freckle on Reed's forehead. A jagged finger-nail swung forward and scratched the freckle while Reed ducked. The nail was as sharp as cracked quartz and friable. "No one would call it dirt," cackled the elderly lady.

Even though he was too distant to comprehend the cackle, the lorry driver looked up and frowned. Above the welding plant, a notice warned about looking at the bright blue. "If that spark touches my tyres," added Reed. "I shall drive this jack handle through the lorry driver's liver." He was clenching and unclenching his hands. The Ostrich's smile widened.

The elderly lady poured water from the kerosene tins into the barrel on the cement stand. The water seethed as it bit into a flaky lining inside the barrel. There seemed to be some inability to cease pouring. Reed punched clenched fists together as the elderly lady went through pouring motions with empty tins over and over again.

Over by the domed dwellings, the dozen or so herders were kneeling around the cooking fires. In the open

market, the multitude was shouting and throwing gourds of beer at the policemen.

While Reed continued to stare of the spark and mutter, the Ostrich took up the rubber siphon. As he drank, he turned the bloodshot eyes toward the domed dwellings. Preparations for the wedding were being managed by the herder women. No bride was visible but a groom in white robes was sitting alone on a granite outcrop contemplating a last few rays of sunset.

Reed's vernacular was shaky. In order to make vowels long enough at times he had to grasp a top lip between finger and thumb and draw it forward. Thereafter, glottal resonance was supposed to bounce along under the lip.

The grasping had developed a corn on the lip which was useful for indicating distances. Vernacular speakers used top lips to point with much as Europeans used fingers.

Reed now pointed the corn at the rubber siphon. He stood. He waited. His hands twitched. "If they distilled their own water here," he muttered, "they would save themselves a lot of trouble." He hawked once or twice as the Ostrich drank. From the lorry came a dry crackle of acetylene.

"Before distilling it, they would have to filter it," explained Reed. The Ostrich closed the bloodshot eyes and he did not relinquish the siphon. Reed's hands went on twitching. The lorry driver kept looking across.

Having burnt holes in the dray between the automobile's tyres, the lorry driver hooked curved bolts over the automobile's axles. He deflated the tyres and the bolts sank through the holes. "They could make a filter out of an aluminium cylinder," said Reed whose hands twitched through outlines of the cylinder in gestures.

"There has to be a lid across the top and an indentation half way down the sides. There is a porcelain candle up through the middle."

The elderly lady produced a musical instrument from beneath a cotton blanket and accompanied Reed's specifications. Reed's hands twitched through the outlines while the elderly lady strummed.

The musical instrument was a shell-shaped box dangling on a plaited thong. Association with the blanket had given both the box and the lady a lustre. Curved slivers of tattoo had been inlaid in the lustre and dried strips of gut had been twisted within. The elderly lady dug long finger-nails into the gut. Clicks and twangs came out.

The lorry driver screwed nuts on to the curved bolts. Then, by inflating the tyres, he tightened the nuts. The automobile was now tensed to spring off the dray like a strapped-down gazelle. Hector Reed himself was tensed as he huddled in closer to the siphon. In describing the water filter, he gesticulated extravagantly.

The elderly lady stopped strumming and stood open-mouthed. A driving whine in Reed's description continued to produce vibrancy from the musical instrument. The lorry driver's beard appeared to be smouldering, stained as it was with henna.

The Ostrich stopped drinking and said: "Steady on, old chap." But the lorry driver shouted at Reed: "Stop talking about women. Do you not know there is a wedding on?" He sprang up into the cab. Crowded in around the waterbarrel, the elderly lady dug long finger-nails into Reed's dried strips of twisted gut. "You are restless, my son," she cackled, "or do I lie?"

The elderly lady wheeled the donkey and the tripping hooves played a roll on the kerosene tins. By plucking at the musical instrument, she supplied melody to the roll.

She played an upland chorus and maintained rhythm by rocking skinny hips. She played the donkey out of the governmental workshop.

The crack in the turban gave the lorry driver a lack of symmetry. He manœuvred lopsidedly in reversing the lorry and he almost crushed Reed. The Ostrich dropped the siphon. "You better look after this," he said, hefting the rifle toward Reed. "Not on your life," cried Reed on catching it.

"The six-oh-six works perfectly, old chap. All it needed was a touch of oil." Upon catching the rifle, Reed staggered. "Do not shoot to kill, Hector. It is more impressive if you knock up sparks," added the Ostrich. "Tracers would be ideal but the ministry cannot afford the phosphorus."

When the lorry driver shook a fist at him, Reed rammed some rounds into a magazine on the rifle. "Why is life so easy for you and so hard for everyone else?" he whined. "The rifle is foolproof," explained the Ostrich. "Hold it wrong and recoil breaks your shoulder. Next time you tend to hold it right."

Reed hopped aside. With the automobile on the dray, the lorry trundled past and swung along the airstrip toward the wedding. Reed slammed the bolt back and forth. Metallic crashes echoed around the workshop. The lorry accelerated.

All that remained of the lorry in the workshop was a dwindling whiff of carbon monoxide, flakes of chromium on the welding plant, and a shakiness in Reed's demeanour.

The multitude was rumbling in the open market. Gourds of beer kept missing the tribal policemen and crashing on to the glazed tiles of the veranda. The passengers were peering out through the glass doors.

"You better get some sleep," croaked the Ostrich. "Meanwhile, I shall set up the biplane." He was rubbing at the tattoo scar on his cheek. His shoulders had sagged and the overalls were crumpling as though there was nothing enclosed. "The biplane?" yelled Reed. "And what about your own people?"

"You call yourself a political leader," said Reed, "and you are always on about how your people prefer to starve in freedom rather than fatten in bondage. . ." "What's that again, Hector?" Swinging like a spider monkey, the Ostrich propelled himself up through the side hatch. His movements were slow and tired. Feeling a triangular scorch on his can-scarred behind, Reed jerked about the workshop shouting at the Ostrich.

". . . but irrespective of whether your people starve or not, Ostrich, you are always on a fat expense account." "At least I pay my own bribes." Framed in the side hatch, the frizzled skull rotated. A flash of sunset glanced off hand-sharpened teeth. The teeth glittered like broken glass embedded in red cement. The smile was a bad shape. "Ah, yes. You don't like being told, do you, Ostrich?"

Hector Reed crashed open the rifle breech and inserted a thumb-nail. He squinted down inside the rifle at the thumb-nail. Then he squinted across the airstrip at the herders. "People are starting to talk about you. If people look up to you, you are supposed to give direction, encouragement. But no one can even talk to you these days. Your mind is always wandering off in the biplane. You are a disappointment, Ostrich." The lorry driver could be seen waving arms about as he spoke to the herders. From time to time he pointed toward the workshop. The herders seemed attentive. They kept gazing into the workshop at Reed.

"You can talk to me any time you like, old bean. I always thought it was the other way round." "Me? I wouldn't want to talk to you. I wouldn't care if you knocked yourself and the biplane off together." In the open market the riot noises were difficult to disregard. Reed shoved at sheet-iron flaps in front of the workshop. "And that scar of yours on the face," he snarled. "You are always aggravating it." By shutting the big flaps in front of the biplane, he transformed the workshop into a hangar. "Why don't you let this herder business heal?"

When a scrap of rusted iron came away in his hands, Reed sat on the displayed toolbox. Thereupon he scampered about on his hands like a baboon. "You force me to sign a contract to block the herders and then you go and inflate their python for them. You ought to pull yourself together, Ostrich."

A gap in the Ostrich's face was more like a new moon and less like an old crater. His movements became more elastic. "And make up your mind whether you are pro-Jamskoni or anti-herder. One minute you are yelling about our need to resist the lice from the grazing area. Next minute it is how festering civilization harms the noble herder. Get a grip on yourself, Ostrich, for sanity's sake. If you want to go back to grazing camels there is no objection. But let me know if I am still in the team, at least." "Just so, just so, old bean." The smile was covering most of the face and curling behind sunskinned ears.

Springing about like a galago, the gaunt figure shot down from the side hatch. Garage sneakers thumped on to the sandy floor and then slapped out on to the murram of the airstrip. Seen from a distance, the Ostrich seemed more co-ordinated than at close quarters. He looked somewhat like a herder himself.

Reed latched the big flaps together. They were composed of flattened biscuit tins and hinged to pillars of sundried cinder bricks. Fretted at daily by the monsoon, the bricks were loosening. Also, an incense tree growing atop a pillar was tearing the bricks apart with its roots.

A looseness in the iron sheets allowed a splinter of the sunset to penetrate the hangar. The splinter fell across a petrol drum and touched a hook dangling from a beam. Reed peeped out between the iron sheets against the sunset. After a while he sighed.

Reed picked up a hawser and put a hand on the hook. Metal strands wore the hand. He was putting loops of the hawser around the petrol drum when the big flaps rattled. He became quiet. Tugging the hook with him, he walked away from the doors. Links above the hook bit into Reed's wrist. The desert boots whispered on sandy oil slicks. A mosquito cruised by leaving a tangible slipstream, a hair-like trace.

When the sheet iron rattled again, Reed was standing far back in the hangar. The flaps crinkled with rust and separated. More sunset penetrated. Through an orange-tinted murkiness, Reed was seen to be leaning forward as though preparatory to hurling the hook along an orbit.

"You are supposed to be controlling the herders, aren't you, Heckie?" A smudge of blue lipstick was giving Mrs Buccleuch a heart condition. Her voice had a whispering dryness suggestive of a flea being scratched through a nylon stocking.

The crimson frock was gathering illumination from the sunset and scattering it into the hangar. She stood like a kindled torch between the sheet-iron flaps. She stood with a knee slightly bent, emphasizing flaring lines in the kindled flesh. Reed collided with the biplane.

When she spoke to him, Reed had raised himself on

his arms. Once the desert boots were clear of the sandy particles, the hook carried Reed along the orbit. The orbit impinged on the biplane.

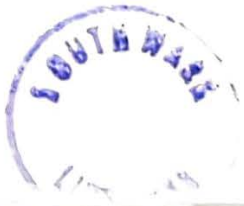
"The passengers are supposed to be touring the market but everyone is on strike or something," the whispering dryness took on a richer tone as though imbued with a mating urge or hyperthyroidism. "The herders are doing nothing. But they seem to make everyone excited, uncontrollable." Reed lowered retractable boots and taxied to a halt.

The garage sneakers could still be heard slapping away along the bedded murram while the sunset rippled over the Ostrich. In a few moments the crater would be flooded with blue shadow except for a far wall from where a kind of earthlight would be bounced back into the blueness. There was no monsoon and a smoky tang of cooking fires hung in horizontal streaks across the airstrip. The dozen or so herders were crouched around the fires.

Reed had pushed his forehead out through the big flaps on the hangar. His face became thinner and he withdrew it. He closed the big flaps and in the darkness shoved Mrs Buccleuch aside. "You are fit," she chuckled. "I can feel all your muscles when you laugh."

Hector Reed tucked the hook under the hawser's loops. Then he craned the petrol drum so that it rose toward a nacelle. The de Havilland 84 Dragon was a luxury for Jamskoni. Around most coffee shambas and pyrethrum spreads, there were merely Rapides and Drovers. But, as with other luxuries, much upkeep was entailed.

When Mrs Buccleuch spoke again, Reed was straining at a handle on a winch. "Why don't you shut up?" she asked. He gave her a look and the handle bumped his elbow. "Quiet," he hissed. From the open market came



multitudinous rumbling. Maybe people were being shattered and glass doors knocked down. "It is all because you let the herders in," snapped Mrs Buccleuch. "But don't worry, Heckie, I shall protect you."

The riot in the market was more of a square dance than a battleline attack. None of the gourds actually struck the tribal policemen but the beer exploded frothily upon impact with the veranda. None of the policemen actually discharged a shotgun, but they kept assembling in formation, unloading and loading the shotguns in a meaningful manner. The rumbling covered most of the crashes. It was a multitudinous argument between vendors and policemen about whether a police department was intended to exploit marketing or protect it. As the argument increased, the crashes decreased.

Reed jammed his teeth together and rotated the handle several times. Effort made his forearms tremble. The petrol drum swung a few inches above the oiled sand. Stresses made the drum plink like a music box. "Would you mind locking the hangar doors?" he gasped. "Why, Heckie. Wouldn't it look better if you did it yourself?"

A wooden handle on the winch had fallen off long ago. Mrs Buccleuch had loose stockings under the crimson frock. She was sending a wearing strain at Reed while she twisted them straight. The petrol drum rose another eighteen inches. Tedious convolutions were taking a surface off Reed's sensitivities.

She bumped at the decrepit flaps. "Hush," shouted Reed. The petrol drum swayed beneath the nacelle. A pillar of cinder bricks wobbled with every bump. "It's the Chief of Mission who is responsible for your appointment, Heckie, isn't he? Would you like me to speak to him for you?"

When the petrol drum touched the nacelle, Reed

steadied the winch handle with a forearm. He reached over and turned a pawl into circumferential teeth on a cast-iron cog. The iron sheets were shaking sympathetically with the rumbling in the market. The rust holes flickered as the multitude shut off light from cooking fires. The female vendors were ululating.

When Reed eased pressure off the forearm, the teeth bit into the pawl and locked the winch. Meanwhile, Mrs Buccleuch's finger-nails were tapping along Reed's spinal column, translating distant crashes into immediate scratches.

Hector Reed polished the Bombay bloomers with rust and pulverized skin from his hands. Then he applied a shoulder to the big flaps and pulled chains through several hasps. Fumbling in the orange-tinted murkiness, he hurried through a clicking of rusted padlocks. He jerked a frayed thumb out of a padlock where a lug had masticated it.

Opening the padlocks was simple enough. Locking them required skill. Tumblers had to be adjusted nicely before a tendon was slammed home. "My word," yelped Reed. He scrubbed blood off the thumb with his tongue.

"Let me, Heckie." Emanating from a copious bosom, a warmth was pressing through the crimson frock on to Reed. The murkiness seemed to take on a texture of fabric, laced with a nose-nipping perfume. There was a rustling of nylon, a muscular gripping of Reed's wrist, and a sliding of moistness over his thumb. Reed said: "Ooh."

There was a weight on Reed's neck. Mrs Buccleuch had hooked an elbow around the neck and was depending upon it. Reed jerked once or twice. Finally the weight was irresistible. Her tremendous thighs flexed

toward the sandy floor and Reed shouted. She was sitting on the handle of the winch.

As the thighs budged the handle, the winch relaxed and the pawl fell out of the circumferential teeth. Stresses from the petrol drum had been holding it in place. The handle rotated and spanked Mrs Buccleuch. "What cheek," she cried leaping on to Reed and driving him to the sandy floor. "Stop," Reed's voice was muffled in yards of crimson. "This is the part of stewed rabbit I love to eat," she was sawing a hand across Reed's kidneys and chuckling.

When the pawl was dislodged, the petrol drum settled back toward the floor of the hangar. Strands of hawser whipped about. The drum played like a percussion instrument while petrol gurgled within it. The winch whirred.

The frock was of nylon. The safarishirt was of merino wool. Sparks crackled between them. The dry whispering voice became electrically charged: "Ah, Heckie. It never happened this way before."

Reed untangled a windpipe from the frock and drew a lock of hair through it. "That's right," he screamed. "Go on." Upon hearing such admonition, Mrs Buccleuch sprang up and turned the pawl so that it fell back into the circumferential teeth.

Potential energy in the suspended drum was being translated into creaks and crinkles. The teeth on the cast-iron cog were invisible with velocity. Around the winch, loops of hawser were snaking about. Together with several cast-iron teeth, the pawl snapped off. A report was loud enough for artillery but within the hangar it was amplified to volcanic dimensions. Shrapnel fragments made holes in the big flaps and carried some iron sheets away.

In the heated air of the crater, the iron sheets boomeranged and landed far out on the airstrip. One big flap broke away from the hinges. The other avalanched the pillar of cinder bricks. By compressing a cushion of air beneath it, the flap rode out along the murram. Mrs Buccleuch and Hector Reed flattened themselves on the sandy floor, avoiding the snaking hawser. The hook kept flinging it from corner to corner of the hangar.

"I can tell that you are hungry for me," said Mrs Buccleuch softly. Reed had taken cover behind a mound of plump flesh and was peering out through a defile in the copious bosom. In the open market the shotguns were pointing in all directions. The tribal policemen had broken ranks. They were standing and staring toward the workshop.

The multitude had stopped rumbling. Hundreds of open mouths were directed toward the workshop. Dust was settling into the floor once more. The passengers had come out on to the tiled veranda. They were waving pink gins toward the workshop. From along the airstrip, the Ostrich flashed a brilliant smile toward the shattered hangar. Only the herders were unmoved. They had not deigned to look up from the smouldering fires.

"Now look what you've done," snarled Reed. Where the riot had once seethed there was now a flat residue. "Now don't resist, Heckie," said Mrs Buccleuch sharply, "otherwise you will get all bruised."

The sunset had expired. Night was as dark as it would ever be. From where the camels mustered at the furrow, a clonking of wooden bells came through with fragility.

The Ostrich had turned away from the market. He walked to where the papersacks of hemp had been unloaded from the camels. The herders looked up. Seizing their spears they arose and followed the Ostrich.

Mrs Buccleuch opened a handbag. Reed had a sensation of myriads of droplets raining on to nerve endings. "You are exactly what I need for my constipation," she explained. There was a momentary scorch like a lick from a bunsen burner then a coolness. She was spraying scent. Then came a caress with talc so fine it felt like oil. Reed whined: "Haven't you got any nail-varnish?"

She rubbed an eau-de-Cologne stick in Reed's face and his eyes widened. The stick bit like acid. His lungs dilated and there was a tang as of ether in the nose. "I can read your thoughts," whispered Mrs Buccleuch. Reed said: "I understand." "Don't you think I can, Heckie?" "I see what you mean." "You must read all my poetry I have written, Heck, so I can burn myself into your brain. Oh, everyone knows you have an inferiority complex. But you have no need of it. The Minister says you know more about living than anyone else." "Did he say that?" cried Reed clutching at the six-oh-six.

On the crimson frock a zip fastener ran from armpit to hem. "You can have it if you take it off," murmured Mrs Buccleuch. At the hem, the zip snapped apart. "You are only an animal," came from Mrs Buccleuch, "but I need your animalish help." Reed tore the armpit out of the frock and unpeeled the crimson in a rough triangle about as big as a tent flap.

Over by the domed dwellings all had become peaceful and domestic. The herders were roasting the Ostrich over a smouldering fire. They had him stretched horizontally. Restless light fluttered under him like reflected sunlight under a bridge. Reed relinquished the six-oh-six and crouched back below Mrs Buccleuch. "Could you change angle," she moaned, "I am rather tender just there."

"It is more comfortable in the biplane," whimpered Mrs Buccleuch. "Don't bet on it," muttered Reed. Due to bikini sunbathing, three elevations of Mrs Buccleuch glowed in a half light. Plains and valleys were clogged in shadow.

A layer of sand, covering the oil slicks, was as fine as flour. By eddying in under the iron sheets, the monsoon had winnowed the flour and deposited the layer. Rapidly Mrs Buccleuch acquired an abrasive texture that took skin off Reed.

There was hardly enough half light to see her, but enough half sound from flesh fretting over flesh to imply swelling contours. Magnified by invisibility, her heights seemed to mount to stratospheric altitudes and her depths to subterranean extremes. On the floury layer she smelled like fresh-baked bread.

Lying in a slit trench between the tremendous thighs, Reed sighted the six-oh-six across a plump parapet. Through a crenellation in the copious bosom he squinted along a barrel at the herders. The six-oh-six weighed like a trench mortar. Mrs Buccleuch surrendered.

Beyond a foresight the herders were stick insects. Huddled so that their heads converged, they contained almost all the light from the slow fire. At a nucleus of the light, the Ostrich was being basted with ghee.

Beneath the six-oh-six was a magazine which protruded neatly into Mrs Buccleuch's intersect. When Reed crashed open the massive breech a bleat came from her: "Ah, Heckie. Don't you think a good movie producer could make a movie out of this?" She was making a real go of her divorce. "I mean a good producer. Not one of those potboilers. I had an artist friend who put my soul into a portrait he painted of me." "Huh."

Hector Reed thumbed a round into the breech as it

was being nudged by a concertina spring in the magazine. He bent a thumb behind the round and flicked. A bullet jumped into a firing chamber and the bolt slammed hard enough for the ejector to bite on to a brass shell. "Please, Heckie. Don't overdo it." Mrs Buccleuch's abdomen flapped with spasms as spare rounds tumbled on to her navel. With the bolt cocked and no safety applied, Reed took up an initial pressure on a trigger. "That's enough, Heckie. I have finished."

"What are you up to, Reed?" Suddenly there was an aroma of curry in the hangar. A voice rasped like clod-hoppers on quartz. Jaw muscles were constricted on Reed's face but he managed not to fire. The Chief was looking into the hangar through a space in the iron sheets. He could have been a clerk in a booking office. Reed spat out some sand and licked some oil off the bolt, "What do you think I'm up to?" he snapped. The six-oh-six kept Mrs Buccleuch flattened.

"I believe the herders are taking an interest in you," said the Chief of Mission with a smile that took no rumples out of the caterpillar eyebrows. Red-beaked envy was eating into him like a tick-bird. Reed growled: "I'll get your permission before letting them emblazon my escutcheon next time." "Don't misunderstand me," the fake smile was gone: "Glad it was you and not me. I will consider allowing you to continue with the assignment," he added grudgingly. "But be prudent. Sooner you clean up the problem, sooner you stop drawing your assignment allowance." "An admirable system."

The herders had stood up. Painted by the firelight they resembled warthog bristles with a vivid contour inside each one. Reed sighed and released the trigger. Not the Ostrich at all, but the python was stretched above the slow fire.

Some of the herders were as tall as the Ostrich and therefore he was difficult to distinguish. But his croak was broadcast conspicuously. He was helping them to discuss legal ownership of the python's spare parts.

Hector Reed rolled aside and Mrs Buccleuch's handbag jabbed into his ribs. "Are you looking for a blue-light outfit?" she asked and the Chief leaned through the space in the iron sheets.

The Chief's voice scraped out loudly: "You know, Reed. Women are only for weaklings." "That's no woman," snarled Reed. "That's your air hostess." "I say. Sorry, Helen." "That's all right, Pete," said Mrs Buccleuch. She was scrambling into Reed's safarishirt.

Reed snatched up the crimson triangle that had once been the frock. He wore it across a shoulder like a toga. He clinched the toga by lapping the handbag strap around his waist. As he walked, the crimson billowed. Already he was sailing out across the sandy floor of the crater.

Driving home would have been preferable. Reed was accustomed to a series of steering-wheel and accelerator-pedal adjustments. Now mesmerized by a recurrent placing of one boot before another, he staggered and tripped. He behaved as though reconnoitring unknown territory. A webbing sling on the six-oh-six scuffed at a shoulder.

Oil lamps had been lit in the market and the passengers were strolling from mat to mat. No longer needing protection from the sunlight, the vendors were naked.

Among the domed dwellings the wedding preparations had calmed to a twittering of guttural voices. The women were dressing each other. A porous-clay urn of glowing charcoals contained a melting blob of cooking incense. Reed sniffed. Whenever the herders changed position

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around the cooking fires, the vendors in the market burbled.

The python's spare parts had been apportioned. Heart, kidneys, and liver were baking on basalt. The kob antelope, partly digested, had been presented to the Ostrich. "You ought to be ashamed," cried Reed. "That was my python." "Oh, come now, old bean." "Don't old bean me."

Even the lorry driver was grinning. He raised an arm in Reed's direction but the others were revelling too hard to notice. After Reed had passed on however, a lone herder arose and followed him. Looking back from the basalt ledges, Reed accelerated. While transferring it to a fresher shoulder, he patted the six-oh-six. Stumbling, he ascended the dry watercourse.

The canopy of the rainforest was crinkling like tissue paper. The night was so quiet that defoliating caterpillars in the canopy were audible. Now and then a brittle explosion as woody seedpods sundered. Near the rim of the crater, a tortoise hissed from the tamarisks and Reed detoured.

As oil lamps in the open market flickered more feebly with distance, yellow light from a half moon appeared to strengthen. Bright flecks of gold lay among the sandy particles. Reed stepped carefully. The flecks were detonators, scattered around where baboons could pick them up and bite them.

Seen from the rim, the crater was creamy with yellow light. The domed dwellings threw back a glare from the cooking fires. The splintery children, normally tucked away at sunset, were sitting in a half circle contemplating the wedding preparations. They wore white smocks. The glare from the cooking fires flickered. The domed dwellings and the white smocks appeared to be trembling.

For unmarried herders, the wedding was a glimpse of a goal. Traditionally, they needed to commit murder to attain the goal. Extermination was a means of promoting life. Otherwise, where would sufficient water come from to quench a rising population? The lone herder was ascending the dry watercourse.

Several rivers poured down from the glaciers on Ol-Skoni. But those that poured on to the grazing area always dried up before even reaching the plains of dust.

Jamskoni farmers laughed at any idea of wanting to deprive the herders of the plains of dust. Yet for the herders the plains were cherished. Out there, no one could shirk a difficulty and survive. The plains gave rise to the herders' courage, their reliance on each other, and to their poetry.

In approaching the tent, Reed collided with what could have been mistaken for a man with arms raised. There was a thud of pudgy flesh, several brisk jabs, and a curse or two from Reed.

Having trudged into a candelabra tree on his way home, Reed subsequently sucked his teeth every time he handled anything. Candelabra trees felt pudgy enough when leaned upon. But when grappled with they revealed ingrown prickles.

Kneeling before the tent presently, Reed unscrewed a brass cap from the tilley lamp. A tiny chain on the cap tinkled. Immediately a mongoose raised a head beside the tent and the lone herder emerged from the tamarisks.

Despite the half moon, they were both invisible. Moreover, they were both inaudible. A rustling curtain of chirps started up from the fringe of thorntrees under the crater rim. Reed clamped his jaws together.

When he poured two pints of kerosene into the lamp,

an oily smell diffused. The mongoose and the herder converged on Reed. He screwed the brass cap back on to the lamp. They came in closer.

Suspended within the lamp was a ceramic nozzle. Fumblingly, Reed tied a mantle to it. The lacerated fingers made hurry difficult. For several seconds there was no noise except for a tut tutting in Reed's teeth.

From the domed dwellings arose a concerted murmur. The koranic schoolmaster had arrived and an intoning of religious verse had begun. Reed stooped sucking the teeth and bowed toward the murmur. While bowing and listening, he dashed alcohol into a metal saucer which lay below the ceramic nozzle. He poked a lighted match through a hole in the lamp and the saucer lit up with a faint thud thud. The schoolmaster was mixing koranic verse with animistic gris gris.

A flame began burning off the mantle and flowing up around a vaporizer inside the lamp. A moth came through the flame and fell on Reed's knee.

The mongoose stopped creeping forward. A long thin body hunched in readiness to strike. Inside its eyeballs, twin reflectors flashed redly.

Light from the flame came up under Reed's face. As well as blinding him, it conferred a chiaroscuro. Facial shadows flew up where highlights usually perched. He resembled a photographic negative.

The herder was staring as he moved in on thong sandals. He stood over Reed on one side while the mongoose hunched below on the other. Still kneeling and with head bowed, Reed joined hands and slowly raised them. Thus he contrived to block the flame from his eyes and the thuds from his ears. He remained motionless, while the intoned murmur continued. Among the domed dwellings, the splintery children were beginning to

fidget. The koranic schoolmaster was transforming life's magic into humdrum drudgery.

The flame of alcohol writhed and fluttered. At last a reverent voice vibrated in the moonlight. "Is it peace?" asked the herder. The murmur continued as a monotonous background. "It is peace," sighed Reed. He flicked away the moth and the mongoose ate it.

The mongoose made a living out of Reed's lamp, while Reed himself depended upon the herders. They burnt out their lives in hazardous operations, while Reed crept about snapping up a safe living. If hemp smuggling were extinguished, then Reed's living would become hazardous.

The lone herder bore no weapon. By light from the alcohol flame it could be seen that he carried baskets of fruit.

The fruit glowed like chinese lanterns. Woven to measure, one to each glow, the baskets dangled from long finger-nails. Grapefruit they were mostly, polished with paperbark to a glassy finish.

The herder was hooking the baskets on to prickles on the candelabra tree. His eyes sparkled like grapefruit toddy. While tearing it out of its woven-to-measure basket, he patted a grapefruit. He spoke but Reed was listening too intently to hear. The crater was shaped like a camel bell. It threw sounds over the rim to Reed who read them as he watched the alcohol being burned away.

The herder was speaking at close range but Reed's ears were tuned for distance. The herder ran a thumbnail around the grapefruit so that two intersecting meridians were scored. The grapefruit's skin was in quarters.

After closing an air-release screw on the lamp, Hector Reed rotated a wheel which pushed a needle into the

vaporizer. He gave several blows to a pressure pump. Then cupping a hand behind an ear, he bowed again toward the crater. The herder leaned toward the ear and said: "Allah favours the devout."

A suspicion of aromatic myrrh came with the utterance and was gone. The flame's fluttering was shutting out sounds from the crater. The needle pricked a minute interstice. Reed was bending over the lamp when a spluttering came from the biplane's selfstarters.

The spluttering was amplified by the hangar and transmitted to the rim of the crater. The herder ripped the quarters of skin apart so that they formed sepals for crescents of the grapefruit. The crescents separated into petals. Each crescent was encased in tissue and marbled by succulent grains within. The herder regarded the flower of fruit and detached a petal. By tearing off its tissue he peeled away all bitterness.

The selfstarters had caught on, and a thundering from the biplane gained in pitch. The propellers drew the biplane along the airstrip and the warped wings took loading off the wheels.

Holding it out to the light, Reed looked hard at a finger-nail beneath which lay a candelabra prickle. He hesitated. Then taking an end of the prickle between his teeth, he raised his head. The prickle was unsheathed.

Curling the fingers over into his palm, he stared at where the prickle had been. There was no blood. Merely a tunnel. Saying: "If we be brothers, why should we contend?" the herder lay a peeled crescent in the palm and grapefruit juice smarted along the tunnel. Capillary action drew it under the finger-nail.

Reed gasped. His body went through a spasm and he sucked his teeth. The herder nodded: "Remorse brings insight," he said.

Peeled of the tissue, the grapefruit flesh was sweet. Reed considered this while manipulating the lamp. He reversed the wheel which withdrew the needle from the vaporizer. A mixture of kerosene gas and air squirted through the ceramic nozzle and was ignited by last licks of the alcohol flame.

The mantle became incandescent. The lamp was alight.

The incandescence broadened a circle of details. A horde of candelabra trees sprang up around the tent. Along the fringe of thorntrees, the strips of red tape flashed as thin flames. From among the domed dwellings, the children turned faces toward the thin flashes. Then, abandoning the intonations of the schoolmaster, they trotted upward toward the neon fringe.

The warped wings tilted sideways at the whitewashed tee and the biplane spiralled into a climb. Reed's movements became brisker. Mrs Buccleuch's handbag contained a customary tangle of bric-à-brac: police-whistle, airpistol, chlorocetaphenon bomb, lipsticks, nail-varnish. As it always did, the lamp exploded and Reed opened the air-release screw. By screwing air out and pumping air in, he managed to keep the fire down enough to save the tent yet up enough to relight the mantle. Soon a dazzling light hissed again from the lamp.

After Reed had painted a side of it with nail-varnish, the lamp radiated white incandescence out through the thorntrees and red incandescence in through the tent. Reed went out through the tamarisks and seized several yards of the red tape. He snapped the tape by coiling it around his knuckles and giving it a jerk. An end of the snapped-off tape was gummed to the head of the moulted python skin.

The tent became a theatre. Gleaming metallically, the crimson triangle of nylon frock was pinned with thorns

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to canvas walls. The triangle caught the red incandescence from the lamp and threw it all back again. Shoved against the crimson, the table became a stage. Since the lamp was at ground level, a band of shadow was above the table. Beneath the camp stretcher, the loudspeaker crackled but Reed made no response.

A bat zipped up from the crater and bounced some incandescence back toward the tent. The tent bounced some twitters back at the bat.

The loudspeaker crackled again but the herder stood back quietly. He was twice as tall as Reed and half as heavy. He relaxed by lifting a thong sandal and standing on one of his own knees.

The squeaky voice of the koranic schoolmaster still trickled up the dry watercourse. The splintery children had drifted off like scraps of rising mist.

The twin engines were echoing off a distant wall of the crater. Under the camp stretcher, the loudspeaker continued to crackle. "Are you on deck, old bean?" croaked the loudspeaker and Reed almost fell over. He stumbled and on the table stage of the theatre a moulted python skin raised a bloated head into brilliant red light. The herder stopped relaxing. He snorted and jumped into a crouching stance.

The bloated head swayed rhythmically and reared itself higher. The herder tensed, a flexed splinter of sweating ebony. The children in white smocks came floating over the crater rim.

Reed's theatre improved with practice. He picked up the microphone and seemed to notice the rearing python. He yelped and stepped back. The python lunged at him. "Jamskoni tower to birdbroom," he chanted like a snake charmer. "You are cleared for a single run. Report when nose down. Over." "As you say, Hector."

The children packed in closely together at the tent flaps. They twittered excitedly and pointed at the python skin. The python had retracted into the shadow above the table. It was visible merely as a vague silveriness floating somewhere in the shadow. There were gasps and squeals from the audience.

The python's skin was about twelve hours moulted. It was more or less transparent like paper-thin latex, yet it offered an incredible wealth of detail. Scales glittered in the red light as truthful embossments. Lip wrinkles and epicanthic folds were authentic. Everything seemed genuine, except that never before had a moulted skin persisted with hostilities.

Reed extended a hand, groping for the vague silveriness. The python reared into the red light and struck at the hand. The children gasped. The herder stared.

"The tapes are most conspicuous, what?" crackled the loudspeaker. "Don't you believe it," chanted Reed, gesturing at the python which swayed as though hypnotized.

Even if the tape supporting the python had been most conspicuous, the children would have found such a performance exciting enough. But within the tent, the tape was not merely inconspicuous. It was absolutely invisible.

The intonations from the koranic schoolmaster were smothered by the thundering of the twin engines. The biplane was approaching along the thorntree rim. "Impossible to miss, old bean," croaked the Ostrich as the python lunged again. Reed picked up the six-oh-six and waved the barrel at the biplane. "You are dead on target," he said.

The centrepole of the tent supported an apex of the crimson backdrop. Also, the red tape passed over the

centrepole. An end of the tape still adhered to the moulted head of the python. Another end was rammed into a desert boot. Reed controlled the python by moving the boot.

Due to many lunges, the tape was becoming unstuck and the head drooped. Reed bent forward to repair the droop but the python swayed back out of control. Reed winked at the herder who forthwith relaxed again and stood upon his other knee.

Since the tape was monochromatic against the monochromatic backdrop of crimson nylon, and illuminated by the monochromatic nail-varnish on the tilley lamp, it was impossible to see. The semi-transparent python appeared to be self propelled. Skinny coils rustled across the table. A dusty hint of organic decay was disseminated. The splintery children were huddled together more tightly than before. They laced arms around each other. Hector Reed seized the six-oh-six rifle and rushed out of the tent.

The python darted toward the centrepole. The children shouted. Reed fired at the biplane.

The bloated head of the python, attached to the invisible tape, flew up to the centrepole. Tied on with handwoven ropes beneath the nacelles, two drums of petrol were making the biplane shudder. Petrol in the drums was sloshing about so that, shaking from side to side, the biplane presented a jittery target. Not that a steady target would have made much difference.

The night air smelled clear but the half moon was smudged with moisture. The twin engines thrummed in the moonlight on a heavy climb and the wings were pastel yellow from the tilley lamp.

Not only was the target unpredictable, but also Reed was hardly a straight marksman. He was fast but he was

not accurate. He would have been even faster if, for each next shot, he had not been required to rush out of the tent where recoil from each last shot had carried him.

Clouds were coasting by overhead in a reviving monsoon and the moonlight was variable. The twin engines thundered more loudly. The biplane approached the tent by flying nose down on the red tapes through the thorntrees. With a simi knife through a side sector, the Ostrich was sawing at the handwoven ropes.

When the ropes snapped, a drum struck the canopy of the rainforest, bounced on the rim, and ricocheted. Bullets from the six-oh-six flashed out toward the ricochets. There was a splintering from the table and camp stretcher as Reed kept being hurled back into the tent. He counteracted the splintering a little by leaning forward just before squeezing the trigger. The recoil then had to push him upright before hurling him back. Explosions from the rounds were carrying his eardrums away and a reek of cordite was filling his lungs.

The drum burst and sprayed petrol through the thorntree fringe. And when Reed managed to explode the second drum as it dropped from its nacelle, all the thorntrees along the fringe were simultaneously engulfed in flames.

The flames rumpled at a moment of conflagration as though a vast fiery blanket had been shaken out. The conflagration coincided with a climax for the wedding. The crater became a well of turbulent firelight, revealing the groom in white robes. He was standing motionless among the domed dwellings. Then the bride emerged from a dwelling in nuptial array. Along the veranda of the passenger hall there was some handclapping. In the market, the farmers and their wives sighed multitudinously.

A layer of salty twigs under the tamarisks afforded some impediment to the conflagration. But, being mainly heaps of oxygen, the thorntrees burned violently. The biplane hurtled past along the rim and its slipstream functioned as a blowtorch. Remnants of flaming canvas scattered fireworks across the crater. Rattles came from the transceiver and bomb explosions from overheated rounds.

The herder had the moulted skin across a shoulder. He was standing where the holocaust could almost devour him. Still chattering from the recent theatre, the white-smocked children were trotting down the dry watercourse back to the wedding. An awful carpet of dead and dying weaver-birds was too apparent.

Under the sinking moon, the snowy slopes of Ol-Skoni were pus yellow. The mountain was a fevered boil on an itchy back. From across the grazing area came thin bellows. Hyenas out there were doing a nightly search of every wrinkle and fold. "An endless journey eats the heart," said the herder raising an arm toward the snowy slopes. "The homeless must journey for ever," replied Reed.

Fitfully the monsoon was seeping over the rim and sporadically the flames revived. The herder lowered the arm toward the domed dwellings on the sandy floor of the crater. "Your home is wherever you find us," he said. Herders always seemed to talk like that. Long journeys into nowhere gave rise to long poetry out of anywhere.

Herder poetry was always the same. Pride in a shameful wasteland and joy through insufferable drought. Between waterholes, the herders sometimes grazed their camels three weeks at a stretch. On such stretches, the camels consumed thornbush and produced a little

milk. The herders consumed the milk and produced the poetry.

Through rippling heat of an endless day, contours wavered moltenly and mirages condensed into caustic images. The images solidified into rippling poetry and audiences like Reed had to pass again through the endless day.

Columns of savoury smells were rising off the cooking fires. The python's performance was by no means terminated. Roasted over charcoals, braised in cooking pots, it diffused an agreeable fragrance. Reed accompanied the herder down the dry watercourse and complimented the women. It was the best python party he had ever been invited to.

Having once been accepted by them, Reed had no further difficulties with the herders. During the ensuing months he studied the hemp and even suggested how improvements might be made. As the smuggling improved so the problem worsened and Reed's stipend had to be increased proportionately.

Finally, as a reward for having failed to eradicate the problem, Reed's contract was extended for an extra tour of duty. No one had ever done more to cope with the problem.

The Ostrich congratulated Reed upon the extension of contract. The ministry of aviation grew in importance, and the savage smile behind the vee-shaped windshield broadened with it.

The Ostrich pasted notices inside the box fuselage advising the passengers to tighten safety belts, to stop smoking, to buy no drinks for herders, to scatter litter for archaeologists. He painted JAMSKONI AIRLINES on the passenger hall in Arabic and European lettering. Since the paint was governmental the lettering was not stable.

After the long rains, vertical streaks beneath the lettering conferred an impression of climbing speed.

The impression was not entirely illusory. Jamskoni airlines prospered. Not only was the hemp carried on aircraft rather than on camels but also a taint of up-country excitement permeated the passengers and they crowded in. No doubt such crowding did little to increase climbing speed, but at least it did help to keep the biplane's tail down.

People said on the coast that to fly Jamskoni was to land in a situation. Depending upon the Superintendent of Police's fortunes, so the situation varied in intensity. It became something of a sport to take-off before being taken over. Of course, not many ever came back for a second visit but not a few passengers insisted on sending up their friends.

By Derek Ingrey

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